The University of Adelaide

Philip Edmonds

Interrogating creative writing outcomes: Wet Ink *as a new model*

It has been nineteen years since Russell Jacoby, now professor of history at UCLA, in his intemperate book *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (1987) threw down the gauntlet to academics employed in US universities to reassess their social and cultural role in the community. Jacoby traced the decline of public intellectuals back to the 1940s and 1950s, stating that the hierarchical structure of the modern university encourages us to write in specialised, jargon-rich language which has meaning pretty much only for other academics. Rather than advocating a dumbing down of the discourses we construct, Jacoby's concern was that we had lost our nerve to intervene outside institutional frameworks. Many of you are already reframing his concerns, even though many academics in Australia are relatively fearful of being labelled as populist generalists.

Creative writing teachers and researchers are not typical academics in that many of us publish for wider readerships than peer-reviewed journals. We are engaged in a 'new humanities', according to Paul Dawson (2005). We are also involved in varying degrees as public intellectuals in a climate where well-known authors are celebrities participating in a growing range of writers' festivals and public performances. Some of our students publish regularly in book form, in magazines and through performances. It also needs to be said that our courses aren't necessarily designed to produce published writers. We are producing better readers, contributing to the education of good teachers and so forth, as well as facilitating the work of 'new' writers.

Because we want publishing outcomes for our students, what institutional resources can we bring into play that can contribute to an intervention in the so-called literary marketplace? Do we regard that as an urgent consideration? *Wet Ink: the Magazine of New Writing* is the story of one attempt at interrogating new models for creative writing outcomes and of framing new ideas.

But briefly, back to the social and cultural space in which this story could reside. I have intimated that creative writing academics have a particular responsibility to interrogate a publishing space inside and outside their institutions, which we could even call the remnants of the bourgeois public sphere Bourdieu has lamented in terms of its decline under late capitalist cultural homogenisation. First, though, some finite framing of what we are dealing with in an institutional context can give us some insight into what is at stake. I am also proposing that, from where I stand, retreating from and lamenting our perceived publishing crisis could result in a depressive culture of inwardness and defensiveness in our institutional frameworks, and even a form of 'recreational grieving' as to the high-mindedness of our intentions. [note 1]

In an article titled 'Reach out and touch somebody', Drusilla Modjeska (2006a) explained why she believes there is a space for academics in general that is worth engaging with, in positive rather than reactionary ways. She suggests ways in which the gap between the academy and the public can be narrowed, and implicit in her suggestions is the assumption that something is amiss. Speaking of the hierarchical tendency to engage with jargon in pursuit of promotion and status, she talks about her involvement with the Humanities Writing Project and the ARC-funded Thesis to Book project. She noted that:

> at Sydney we offered seminars for people wanting to write out from the academy: for the concurrent master classes of 20 places, we had more than 100 applications … For many … it was the first time they'd focused on writing: that is, on the intellectual as well as the practical issues. (Modjeska 2006a: 31)

Modjeska was somewhat cautionary, however, when venturing further to discuss outcomes for creative writing students, writing that they 'often don't have a lot to write about. Sophisticated writing, but not much substance' (Modjeska 2006a: 31). At this point we probably recognize the worst type of criticism of creative writing courses in the US where, it is claimed, a circular system operates of institutional sanctification, peer publication and reviewing in limited circulation journals. I don't want to dwell on this; only to suggest the danger of too much validation within institutional frameworks.

Even so, within every creative writing student there is a potential public intellectual looking to venture into a relationship with readers. And they are engaging with a third space, a creative intelligence they work in, which ultimately engages passion, accessibility and communication skills. This isn't always encouraged in the language used in the current humanities, which might be one of the reasons for the popularity of creative writing in the universities. In other words, creative writers have a great chance at the moment of creating bridges into the public sphere.

How can that be achieved in an environment where unknown authors are finding it difficult to gain exposure despite the 'author as celebrity' moment we are moving through? *Wet Ink*, I believe, came out of these very contradictions and urgent considerations. I had theorized the potential model in an article in *TEXT*, stating that:

> I am concerned about further integration of our programs into existing community initiatives so as to maximize the best use of resources. Ultimately, creative writing programs can only operate to their full potential alongside an expanding and vibrant publishing culture predicated on active notions of cultural difference. (Edmonds 2004)

I suggested that of course we produce work that will probably never become marketable, and that we should defend cultural difference against the over-reaching desires of booksellers such as Borders and large publishers. Even so, I added: 'It would also be irresponsible of us in turn to privilege the assumption that attracting readers is somehow un-pure,' and that one of the consequences of such a public withdrawal would be that:

> creative writing in the universities may end up as a quaint cottage industry largely consisting of weeding out good manuscripts for a publishing industry unable to retain competent editorial staff. (Edmonds 2004)

Such a withdrawal from public space would be leaving the field to a publishing industry in crisis over its editorial decisions and possible profitability. In this sense, I adhere to Mark Davis' notion that on the available evidence there is a declining 'literary paradigm' in Australia, and to his assertion that there appears to be a declining readership for what we have constructed to be 'serious fiction' (Davis 2006: 91-108). Even so, there may be pointers in here, through the gloom, into ways of finding new readerships, and what it is that is failing existing readers. If the answer to the latter is that there is an absence of good storytelling in current novels, then creative writing courses could take some notice, at least in an exploratory way. That, though, is a discussion for another place.

I am suggesting, that we (and *Wet Ink* in particular) can be involved in interrogating a third space containing general readers, rather than just other writing students, or people trained in particular university discourses. Ultimately that is something that has to happen for any author to move from the cloistered environment of mentorship into any notion of readership. Thus *Wet Ink* involves people from the university and elsewhere, it is self-funding and nationally distributed. The magazine articulates, if you like, an outward-facing creative writing model, rather than an inward-facing 'club' model within an institution. Further to that, the anthology *Emerge: New Australian Writing* - featuring new writing from the universities - is another manifestation of this thinking.

A third space then, between the university and constructed commercial genres, articulates for us the publishing crisis and offers a way to a solution. As Modjeska suggests, when speaking of the problem of 'academic' writing:

> The humanities risk remaining in a double bind that fuels anxiety about popularising on the one side, and about academic obfuscation on the other, leaving the public and the intellectual to drift further apart. (Modjeska 2006a: 31)

A small magazine like *Wet Ink* can't make mountains move, but, because it is thinking more broadly than the exclusive university publishing model, it can have an influence more significant than its initial circulation.

Just over a year and a half ago, there was in the weekend press a series of articles - concerning 'exposés' of the publishing industry, the problems of 'literary' fiction and the problem of new writers in general - and, in a class I was teaching at Adelaide University, depression was in the air. There were two people in that class who were, in my opinion, as good writers as anyone I had seen in years and it irritated me that they and I felt so powerless.

I had theorised my frustrations, as I have suggested, and had projected a model for a new magazine. This model was different from the status quo of literary magazines that were overly expensive to print and grant-dependent. I suggested that:

> A striking feature [of Australian literary magazines] is the monumentalism inscribed in the artefact. … as the years have rolled on, the magazines look even chunkier, more expensively produced, more like books because that is the way they are taken seriously…such formats require high levels of taxpayer support, and yet they remain in permanent crisis … Maybe we accept this type of magazine because it reflects the way in which we construct ourselves in the universities: as marginal, substantial, special limited editions? (Edmonds 2004)

I was of course suggesting that somewhere in all of that, our occasionally timid, aristocratic tendencies (which can be shorthand for the motivation of some small press publishers) were contributing to the so-called crisis for new writers, despite all our student anthologies, and that a more populist model of some description could be possible.

It was one of those ideas whose time had come, because others, it seemed, were thinking the same thing. So when I sent an email around a few networks, asking people to come to a meeting in early December 2004, 30 people turned up. It was all quite simple at that stage - if twenty came along again in the new year, and fifteen to a February meeting, I felt sure we'd make it, so long as the core group were practical enough to see it through. At the same time, a debate was developing as to the efficacy of the established annual student anthology at Adelaide University. Even though our anthologies had been well received they were circulating within a very limited readership of friends and relatives; and although published by Wakefield Press, they were, perhaps unfairly, almost impossible to sell through the book trade. Thus they were marginalized back into the university structure. In 2006 Adelaide University dropped its student creative writing anthology in favour of some assistance to *Wet Ink* and to encouraging readings at venues around the city, a move that has energised the local literary community. To an extent, this debate informed our thinking as to why *Wet Ink*, with some help from Adelaide University, has sponsored the *Emerge* anthology, the offspring of *Spiny Babbler*, which is a collection of writing from students around Australia. Publication in a national context is a way in which writers can reach out to potential readers. But back to the early *Wet Ink* story, which predates any of that.

Dominique Wilson had a practical gleam in her eye, and as a writer and former manager of a cattle property in southern NSW, I knew that she wouldn't take any crap from 'precious' writers. Simon Lownsborough and Kerrie Harrison of graphic production house Slinc Creative had, we came to learn, been thinking of a similar idea for quite some time, so they came along to the February meeting, around the time we were searching for a name. None of us had Simon's design abilities, so I was incredibly relieved. Emmett Stinson, a postgraduate from the US, came up with the name *Wet Ink* and we liked it because it was active rather than passive, a metaphor for 'new writing' and an entry into the way we could dream.

Who would be editors? That was a difficult one. I had talked to Tom Shapcott, concerned that in Adelaide there are some distinct elites we should cultivate. He advised me to tap into new energies, so we went with that model (for better or worse), making sure that there were two eyes on everything, and that Dominique and I, as managing editors, would be responsible for the final cut. We really didn't want to get bogged down in endless committees.

The group, which was refining itself in terms of commitment and expertise, was determined about being an independent community structure, even though a good number of us worked at, or were students of, the English Department of Adelaide University. I had also theorised in my *TEXT* article that the university publishing model was a thing of the past, but that universities could possibly be contributing sponsors and participants in a broader venture.

Wet Ink would be a magazine of new writing, devoting most of its pages to original creative writing from around Australia. We wanted to provide more space for original creative writing without feeling the need to publish scholarly articles. We would have an extended interview with a writer in each issue and some nonfiction, but we would provide more space to new writers than any other magazine in Australia. We are South Australia-based, which means that

we publish a good number of locals, but these people compete in a national context. Wow - such confidence!

We needed a national distributor, and found one, and are militant in the belief that we should at least cover our production costs through advertising. Years before, I had worked at a community radio station in Victoria with Lindy Reid who had kept the place alive through sponsorship (the polite word for advertising used in community radio), and on learning that she was looking for a new challenge I asked whether she would be as idealistic as the rest of the group, for a time at least. She said yes. So far we have covered costs through 'sponsorship', subscriptions and retail sales, and because of recent assistance from the Australia Council we can now pay writers for their contributions.

It hasn't been easy trying to establish *Wet Ink* as a viable business in a difficult and small publishing environment, so it is vitally important to build up the subscription base with constituencies such as reading groups and writers' centres so that we can facilitate and expand our distribution base.

At the time of writing, *Wet Ink* has published six issues and we are very proud of them, thanks to the countless hours of voluntary labour put in by our team. But we know that we have to move to a semi-professional base to ensure long-term survival and to maintain our excellent editorial and production standards. Speaking for myself, I have seen similar ventures come and go because of an over-reliance on structures of spurious patronage and personality clashes. We will not let that happen.

I think we have tapped into a reservoir of unmet demand and repressed desire struggling to come to the surface in a society ruled by rampant individualism and melancholic withdrawal. We have terrifying 'freedoms' in a time of terrorism it seems, so perhaps the task is to have a go at what is possible. In this way you, dear Reader, can come on board, not necessarily as a contributor, but by simply tapping into the way we are recreating a sense of community. *Wet Ink* is, in our estimation, a series of interlocking conversations.

Individuals can subscribe for $54, institutions for $62, and students and concession holders for $42. Encourage students to subscribe and particularly get your libraries to do so. You can buy the magazine in most good booksellers and newsagents, and if an outlet doesn't have it please ask them to get it in because they are missing out on the historic task of promoting new writers in Australia. More information can be viewed on our website at www.wetink.com.au.

As Modjeska has said of what I have suggested is a third space, the problem is to interrogate: 'the danger … [that the public and intellectuals] lose sight of each other'. She expanded further:

> the question that concerns those of us working in this area is how to reverse the disconnection and open a space of creative and intellectual potential. (Modjeska 2006a: 31)

More to the point, Modjeska has noted Dorothy Green's belief that it is 'good readers who make good writers, and not the other way around' (Modjeska 2006b: 46). She speaks of a dynamic relationship between writers and readers; not a passive projection onto would-be readers. She quotes Sartre:

> the literary object is a peculiar top which exists only in movement. To make it come into view a concrete act called reading is necessary, and it lasts only as long as this act can

> last. Beyond that, there are only black marks on paper. (Sartre, in Modjeska 2006b: 47)

Wet Ink is, in our view, an intervention in that process. It is representative of the broader challenge of thinking laterally outside our own boltholes at a time when we are all competing with one another. My contention is that we can't remain as rivals anymore. Co-operative ventures can make a difference. I think *Wet Ink* has already made a difference: for example, large publishers are interested in authors we have published, such as Dena Thorne-Pezet. But, more to the point, new writers throughout Australia are being given more opportunities to find readers. You can subscribe by going to our website wetink.com.au and following the links.

Notes

1. See Ken Ruthven 2006. Ruthven uses the term to describe a type of political correctness that inhabits contemporary cultural theory. I refer to it here as a remorseful wailing that eschews the responsibility for change. return to text

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Phillip Edmonds is the founding co-managing editor of Wet Ink: the Magazine of New Writing *and a lecturer in the English Department at Adelaide University. He was heavily involved in small press publishing during the 1970s. He has published two volumes of short fiction and numerous short stories in Australian literary magazines.*

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http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb
Text@griffith.edu.au