

## Editorial

### ***'Extraordinary, compelling and masterful mystery bestsellers': Current newspaper reviewing***

One of the contexts writers write into is that of the critical reviewing industry. Reviews by book critics - good or bad - in newspapers, journals and television programs, and also on the web, contribute to the success or otherwise of a creative work. Some newspapers and TV shows have more influence than others - for various reasons, including their individual status as reviewing publications/programs and respect given their particular reviewers. Some magazines and periodicals, as arms of larger companies which also operate publishing houses, give greater reviewing space to books produced by co-publishers in their conglomerate stable.

None of the above is news to writers who have suffered the slings and arrows of the reviewing industry. But how significantly do university writing programs teach about this area? We are currently impelled by our universities to teach from research contexts into career-path contexts. But how well do we know the critical industry, its dynamics, and its influence on writers' careers?

Recent research from DowJones' Factiva Insight media benchmarking group - *Coverage of Books in Australian Newspapers* (2007) - looked at newspaper reviewing in Australia for the first 6 months of 2007. It found the following, according to its summary:

- The bigger publishers - HarperCollins, Allen & Unwin, Penguin, Random House, Pan Macmillan - win larger shares of reporting and reviews of books in Australia.
- The *Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Australian* generate the most coverage.
- HarperCollins gets most coverage from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Herald-Sun* and the *Age*.
- The *Daily Telegraph* gives attention to books from Pan Macmillan.
- The smaller publisher Scribe wins space from its local newspaper the *Age* followed by the *Sydney Morning Herald*.
- Australian book reviewers like writing about mysteries and bestsellers.
- And they are fond of the words 'extraordinary', 'compelling', 'page-turner', 'stunning'.
- Also popular is describing a writer as a 'master' or their works as 'masterful'.
- 'Unputdownable' is creeping into reviews. It appeared nine times in the first six months of 2007. (Factiva Insight 2007)

Looking deeper into the data graphs Factiva Insight provide in their Powerpoint publication, one can see that:

- In six months the *Age* published 365 book reviews, the *Sydney Morning Herald* 263, the *Australian* 210, the *Canberra Times* 157, the *Courier Mail* 122 - these are the major group of reviewing newspapers, and the others followed.
- The others in the survey comprised 15 newspapers around Australia with a total of 823 reviews for the six months.
- In the six months, in the major group, HarperCollins received 382 reviews, Allen & Unwin 357, Penguin 340 and Random House 312.
- Then there was a big jump down to the middle group: Pan Macmillan 149 reviews, Hachette Livre 115, ABC Books 115 and Scribe 96.
- And then there was another big jump down to the lower group: MUP 45, Black Inc 44, FACP 33, UNSW Press 21, UWA Press 8, and UQP 7.

There are plenty more stats in the publication, but some of interest are:

- The *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Herald-Sun* prefer to review Penguin books.
- The *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* prefer to review Allen & Unwin books.
- And the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Herald-Sun* prefer to review Pan Macmillan books.

The word-analysis Factiva has done is possibly amusing in several ways, but the graphs show that:

- The words 'mystery' or 'mysteries' were used 329 times in book reviews in the six months and were mostly used by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*.
- The word 'bestseller' was used 244 times in book reviews in the six months and was mostly used by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*.
- The word 'extraordinary' was used 241 times in book reviews in the six months and was mostly used by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Australian*.
- The words 'master' or 'masterful' were used 201 times in book reviews in the six months and were mostly used by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*.
- The word 'compelling' was used 200 times in book reviews in the six months and was mostly used by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*.
- And then there was a big jump down to the word 'page-turner' which was used 60 times in book reviews in the six months and was mostly used by the *Herald-Sun* and the *Daily Telegraph*.

There's food for thought here. Providing that we can teach our students to write *mystery bestsellers* that are *extraordinary*, *compelling* and *masterful* - and possibly *page-turners* - we'll be doing a good job in terms of current university requirements that we ready our students for the industry.

Nigel Krauth  
Jen Webb

## Reference

Factiva Insight 2007 *Coverage of Books in Australian Newspapers*, Factiva Insight: Media Benchmark, chris.pash@dowjones.com. Ppt slide 2. return to text

---

**TEXT**

**Vol 11 No 2 October 2007**

**<http://www.textjournal.com.au>**

**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb**

**[Text@griffith.edu.au](mailto:Text@griffith.edu.au)**