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How to Write a 'How to Write' Book: The Writer as Entrepreneur

> *Or gradus ad Parnassum*, for those who might like to learn. The book [paper] is not addressed to those who have arrived at full knowledge of the subject without knowing the facts.
> - Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*

1 Introduction, Scope & Methodology

This paper considers the genre of the writing text. It canvasses a number of types, asks why authors direct their creative energies into this kind of project, and notes the most common strategies that they employ. It discusses the work of writers with an existing public profile and, therefore, with already acknowledged skills and knowledge in the area. In addition, it raises the question of the writing text as a 'theory-free zone', as a species of writing that acts as if it can escape theory because it has no other agenda than to inspire and teach.

Ours is an initial investigation that considers Australasian writers' forays into the field of How To Write books. We have identified many overseas writers' works of the same or a similar kind and expect to analyse them in the future. While there is also much more to be said from the publishers' point of view, we have mainly confined this preliminary inquiry to the authorial perspective in order to keep the task manageable.

The shape of this paper can be summarised as follows. After explaining our selection process, we cover some background issues, and then set out to discover who are the authors of How To Write texts. This leads us to ponder the writers' motivation and aims before considering a few specific books in detail, including how they indicate their intended readership. We broach the vexed question of literary theory - is it addressed at all and, if so, how? Finally, we assemble a list of popular strategies employed by the writers, and draw some conclusions from this preliminary investigation.

There seems to be a particular kind of symbiotic relationship between writers and readers in this genre that does not apply in most others, at least not so consciously. Authors have needs that drive them to write How To books. In the paper we look at three in depth: the need for income, reputation and teaching resources. Readers have needs as well that drive

them to consult certain types. Although well-written texts will entertain, readers come with wider expectations, because most such texts imply, if not state, that they offer particular benefits to the would-be writer. Being able to write anything at all is usually the first benefit sought and so 'Getting started' is the first motivator provided. If the hints, stratagems or exercises work, readers begin to trust the author and so trust that all the other promises, overt and covert, in the text will be fulfilled. Perhaps then the ultimate leap of faith; by working through a writing text and taking all the advice, some day the novice, too, will translate an idea into a polished narrative ready for a publishers' bidding war.

The most obvious boon desired, then, is that a text will reveal 'a secret' so that the committed might become professionals and even perhaps household names. As their mentors did, readers can then capitalise on that currency by releasing a book that distills their own inside knowledge. So the wheel turns; they feed their good fortunes and skills back to the uninitiated, who also can become wealthy and famous and happy. But we are jumping ahead somewhat. Before we share the secrets we have uncovered about these books that turn around lives, let us look at the array of How To books on offer.

What's In and What's Out

We could not and did not try to cover everything in this exercise. Our first task was to narrow the genre range so that we had something workable for the scope appropriate to an article. Our initial investigation might then lead to further research.

We decided to cover the genres of poetry, children's writing and adult fiction, because most writing workshops still focus on these perceived 'status' genres. Within fiction we include some types of popular fiction, such as crime and fantasy. They are growth industries - and the books that sell have the status of big bucks. Of course some popular genre fiction - fantasy, science fiction, crime - can be of a high calibre as well.

Other nonfiction, including life writing, was excluded at this stage in order to concentrate on the facets of writing that seem to have most appeal to learning writers in both tertiary and community contexts. (We acknowledge, however, that the broad nonfiction category is attracting growing interest.) Keeping the focus described earlier meant putting aside a number of interesting works that take a different approach to the How To text and looking, for the time being, at books that related more directly to issues of craft.

We excluded dedicated journalism textbooks, which tend to deal with commercially-orientated and often salaried writing careers or which target those doing a journalism degree. Similarly, we excluded business and workplace writing guides, and guides to academic essay writing. These latter sell primarily because of content and usability and tend to be ordered in bulk by topic coordinators as set or recommended texts. The personality or prestige of authors is not usually a key selling point.

Another type of How To Write book deals with the practicalities of treating writing as a business, such as Irina Dunn's *The Writer's Guide: A Companion to Writing for Pleasure or Publication* (Dunn 2000). As Donna Lee Brien noted, Dunn's book is 'divided…into major sections which follow, logically, the process of moving through the stages of producing and publishing a manuscript' (Brien 2002). Patrick West found it a very full resource but not such a useful guide to writing itself (West

2002). Finally, we did not discover any Australasian titles that offered a lifestyle approach to writing, like Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life* (Dillard 1989). In any case, it would have fallen outside our present scope. Both of these kinds of book, though, can act as valuable companions to titles that concentrate much more on the development of writing skills.

We have already discovered, thus, several types of book connected to writing that deserve closer attention at a later stage; not only those that treat other genres but those produced by overseas writers in different cultural contexts. And there are several questions in orbit; for instance, who actually adopts the practices suggested in How To Write books, and who is the book aimed at - the practicing writer or the learning writer? All these topics might be addressed in future research.

How Did We Tackle the Task?

There were twenty-three Australasian titles in our first survey, with publication dates ranging from 1981 to 2003 (nine of them in the 1990s). Discussing them all is not feasible, so we selected a few that illustrate different approaches and some common elements. One of the prime differences worth noting is the clarity, or lack of it, with which authors identify and signal their target readership.

To locate the books for this investigation, we scoured our own bookshelves on the basis that anything we had kept should have some merit. Books had obviously been acquired in a number of ways: through word-of-mouth advice; as examination copies; as texts for our students; or as texts when we had been students. We might have met the author, heard or seen an interview, or simply admired his or her work.

The element of chance turned out to be instructive in that it pointed to significant factors in the How To genre. Which book caught our eyes with an attractive cover? Which one was put back because of a jumbled table of contents or a cluttered layout? Not only does writing style matter in a text's success, but also aesthetics, including overall design, and price.

So, first impressions count. Apart from the obvious selling point of reputation - whether we had already known and respected the authors - we felt that these books would be gauged according to their covers, their indicated contents, and something in the initial statements of intent or philosophy. Accordingly, we looked at these aspects, with special attention being given to the contents pages, preface, introduction or first chapter - any place that seemed to offer a ready insight into the writer's rationale and structure. These were the kind of things we thought would guide a typical purchaser. We broke the titles into national groups - Australian, UK, US and, as it happens, a solitary New Zealand volume - and then further separated them according to literary genre. Finally, for the sake of convenience and space, we decided to focus in this paper on the Australian titles.

We made notes on any clear statements of purpose, distinctive contents and striking characteristics that a potential reader might notice. We were especially interested in whether the author mentioned having a particular kind of reader in mind. By evaluating these aspects, we hoped to build a picture of best practice in the How To genre in Australian titles.

Some Background Considerations

The annual value of book sales by major sellers in Australia has hovered around $1,300m (about 130 million books) in recent years. Australian

Bureau of Statistics figures vary on how much of this is nonfiction but it comprises somewhere between a third to a half (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004). How To books sit somewhere in the nonfiction category.

The Department of Communications, Information Technology & the Arts commissioned AC Nielsen to report on books in Australia for its Books Alive program, which is coordinated by the Australia Council for the Arts. AC Nielsen conducted a national telephone survey of just over 1500 adults to produce *A National Survey of Reading, Buying and Borrowing Books for Pleasure*. At the risk of oversimplifying, it is nonetheless interesting to note that the most common readers for pleasure were tertiary-educated women over 65 who were of upper socio-economic status (AC Nielsen 2003: 7). This is a profile of all respondents rather than just of nonfiction readers, however.

The relative popularity of How To Write titles is difficult to gauge given the classifications used in the survey. On average, respondents named 2.2 non-fiction categories among their preferred reading topics, the runaway leader being 'Biographies', which was nominated by 48% of respondents. The most likely categories for How To Write books might be 'Self Help', nominated by 11% of respondents (9% male and 13% female), or 'Other', at 9% (10% male and 8% female) (AC Nielsen 2003: 71). Even if we acknowledge that fewer than one in ten readers might be inclined to read a How To Write book, it is still true that fortunes can be made on that kind of market share.

The main sources of information used by readers to weigh up their book choices were word of mouth (53%), information on the actual book (37%) and reviews (30%), but the key purchasing determinants were the buyer's own response to the topic and their prior positive experience reading that author's work (AC Nielsen 2003: 11). That's good news for successful writers looking to capitalise on their recognition factor (their brand power) by producing a How To Write book.

What can we learn from this survey? Amongst other things we might argue that it shows nonfiction is popular (no surprise there); the gender split of How To Write books' readers is roughly equal (although no doubt individuals might challenge this finding from their own experience as workshop leaders in the community); and well-known authors are a stronger bet to succeed than lesser luminaries, however classy their act.

How then do publishers respond to proposals or manuscripts from authors of How To Write books? What makes them sit up and take notice? Michael Bollen of Wakefield Press, an Adelaide niche publisher specialising in nonfiction (and who published Geoff Goodfellow's *Triggers*), said that there are many How To Write books and that he would not like to start theorising about their essential characteristics - except in one or two respects. If offered such a manuscript, he said he would most likely ask the author, 'How is this one different?' There would need to be a pronounced and positive difference, he thought, before he would consider publishing. On the other hand, 'If the answer was, "I have 800 students a year who would buy it", we'd love to do it.' Rather than just focus on How To Write books, though, he wondered why there weren't more good grammar books being submitted (Bollen 2005).

Publishers' profit margins increased from 3.3% in 2001/2002 to 5.6% in 2002/2003, and author royalties grew slightly from 6.9% of gross sales to

7.5% (or from 10.9% to 11.7% of Australian sales) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005). Before we lament that publishers cleared less than authors, we must recall that many salaries are drawn before that publishing profit is finalised, whereas the authors' figures represent their *gross* incomes. Nonetheless, deciding to publish a How To Write book might still need to rest on a persuasive business case being put to a publisher. This paper is not the place for a detailed analysis of publishers' points of view but we hope that the preceding section has provided some useful context to what follows.

2 Findings

Coming Clean

We should come clean now and say that there is no 'secret' to how to write and that many of the How-to-Write writers specifically try to debunk that idea relatively early in their books. As for inspiration and the whole notion of 'getting started' (a popular chapter title, too), most writers tend to turn readers back to their own experiences as a primary source of material. Rather, they recommend the act of writing in preference to any amount of wishful thinking, mental planning or procrastination. Thus, magical intervention is discarded in favour of practice and efficient use of time. This may be disheartening for some readers, especially if the blurb on the back cover suggests otherwise.

Michael Cader, editor of the industry newsletter, *Publisher's Lunch*, remarked in a *Wall Street Journal* article about How to Write books:

> These books may look like simple instruction, and they are in a way, but they really belong in the "magic" section of the bookstore, next to "grand illusions" and "let's pretend". Or in the further reaches of self-help. Evidently there exists a widespread belief that the good ol' Yankee can-do spirit - the kind that helps you to learn how to puff a soufflé or lay a garden path - extends to an imaginative realm like novel-writing. But it hardly needs saying: No mere manual can break the creative process down to retraceable steps and isolated parts for convenient home assembly. (Cader 2001)

If this is true, the next logical question is: Who writes these books, and why?

Who Writes and Why? - The Writer as Entrepreneur

Why do authors write How To Write books, when deep down even some of them know that they cannot pass on the magic? If for the most part they relay hints to improve what is usually mediocre work, is the effort worth it? Are they culpable in deluding the wannabees?

The title of our paper raises the 'how to write' issue. Authors of How To Write books often deal with 'Why write?' first, challenging their readers' motivations, and asking 'Are you serious about your goals?' This generally occurs in an introduction or 'Getting Started' section. But some authors openly acknowledge their own reasons for writing a How To book. So why did some of them get started, taking the risk as an entrepreneur by investing in this type of project?

The most likely author of a How To Write book is not the journeyman writer or the freelance journalist, who is often already occupied earning a

full-time living as professional writer. Instead, it is the writer of imaginative literature, seizing an opportunity to relate their techniques and philosophies to novices and, in the process, acting more entrepreneurial than usual. Of course, the definitions here are somewhat crude; the two types of writer are not necessarily mutually exclusive. There may be differences in the way that writers perceive their role in the market, how they promote themselves, their risk awareness, their willingness to engage in commercial writing, their knowledge of business practices, and their familiarity with taxation and other relevant legal issues. This sketch of a more commercially-aware writer seems to fit the freelancer better but could conceivably describe some literary writers, too. Finally, whether the writer has another occupation bears on their ability, let alone their willingness, to take on risky projects.

When any author branches out into the How To Write field, it marks a diversification of his or her writing portfolio. That departure reinforces the impression that a business decision has been made. If the book does well, there will be greater recognition as a writer and some money, but that is not to say that the motives are impure. For instance, *Lift Off!: An Introductory Course In Creative Writing* (Evans & Deller-Evans 2002), co-written by one of this paper's authors, was designed to bring together materials that had been used for community writing groups as well as to inspire new writers. Fame and fortune were not expected.

It's time now to tease out some of those notions about making money, enhancing one's reputation, and creating teaching resources.

The How to Books' Ethos and Raison d'Etre: Income/Reputation/Teaching Resources

a) Income

Risk is endemic in any small business, and 'a professional writer is a small business…trading in literary ideas' (Edwards 132) that cannot rely on creative writing alone for income. Although we must acknowledge that a few writers are big business - Stephen King, J.K. Rowling, Bryce Courtney, et al - these are in the minority, especially in Australia. The How To genre exists, therefore, as much for writers as for audience, collecting teaching materials in one place and supplementing income. Those in Australia who class themselves as professional writers will almost always undertake more than one type of writing to survive. The romantic idea of the artists starving in a garret gives way when there is a mortgage to pay and a family to feed.

Consider Hazel Edwards, a professional writer for more than two decades, who has written award-winning children's books, nonfiction and more than one How To guide: e.g. *The Business of Writing for Young People* (with Goldie Alexander, Edwards & Alexander 1998) and *Writing a Non-Boring Family History* (Edwards 1997). Professional writers cannot afford to be precious about their work, which is both an art and a craft. She explains:

> …my income enables me to choose the workstyle balance that I prefer, and to carry a non-commercial writing project for "my soul", at my own expense. But I do not consider writing a novel or short story "superior" to writing a corporate script. They are equal in crafting skills but different in their aims. (Edwards 132-34)

Edwards certainly maintains an accent on writing as a businesslike activity that can lead to bankruptcy because of bad advice.

> Some creative writing students are not being given realistic advice and workstyle practices to equip them to survive as professional creators in the commercial world. There's a difference between a literary dabbler occupying an academic salaried position, writing literature for small circulation or no-pay magazines; a literary grant applicant; and someone who survives through their own skills. (Edwards 1992: 9-10)

In other words, some teachers and texts feed the dream, exploiting the vulnerable, which for Edwards creates 'an ethical dilemma of encouraging student creative writers into unrealistic expectations of their future lifestyles' (Edwards 1992: 10). Ironically, producing How To books at least feeds the mouths of some writers.

It should be pointed out that convincing publishers to finance these guides, however, takes some negotiation on the author's part. A publishing proposal would have to make clear, especially in the case of a writer without a high profile, that there was a gap in the market (see earlier comments by Michael Bollen of Wakefield Press). The argument would be that readers are interested in a particular genre or approach and that there are no or few or inadequate texts to satisfy this need.

It would be useful to know who buys these books in more detail than indicated by the AC Nielsen survey figures previously cited. The publishers themselves may have some idea of the market segmentation. Does each publishing house tend to serve that market niche by pushing one such title only? What information do they have, and rely upon? How much is decided on the basis of judgement skills derived from their past experience rather than hard data? These are matters that we intend to investigate in the future. Regardless of the answers, the author would be better prepared if he or she gave some thought to readership, since that affects both the content of the book and presumably the success of the pitch made to a publisher.

b) Reputation

Reputation, credentials, qualifications - these all come into play in the decision to write a How To book. Many authors with moderate reputations teach in the community; they are not, therefore, salaried teachers, so they need to trade on the goodwill attached to their names. Those with an established reputation understand that it guarantees wider recognition, too. This often translates into reasonable sales among both teachers and learning writers, but, like school visits, guest speeches or readings, textbook production is not purely commercial. It supplements revenue from creative writing pursuits but feeds back into reputation.

The corollary to this principle is that those with the biggest reputations would be expected to have the healthiest sales of their How To books, since they can trade on their existing profiles. In turn, that would further enhance their reputations and income (especially if they use their creative works as examples). Prospective buyers/students in a bookshop's How To section might decide to trust John Marsden's advice because they like his fiction. Why should they try the advisory work of a writer they don't know?

This is, in fact, not a new idea at all: go to the authority who not only teaches, but practices, successfully. Back in 1934, in his *ABC of Reading*, Ezra Pound argued on behalf of quality:

> You would think that anyone wanting to know about poetry would do one of two things or both, i.e., LOOK at it or listen to it. He might even think about it?
> And if he wanted advice he would go to someone who KNEW something about it.
> If you wanted to know something about an automobile, would you go to a man who had made one and driven it, or to a man who had merely heard about it?
> And of the two men who had made automobiles, would you go to one who had made a good one, or one who had made a botch?
> Would you look at the actual car or only at the specifications?
> In the case of poetry, there is, or seems to be, a good deal to be looked at. And there seem to be very few authentic specifications available. (Pound 1934: 30-31)

So the message is: *Listen to the bard, the creator of the work; he is the master* (and it *would* have been a '*he*' in 1934). Why bother with inferior craftspersons and non-practitioners? Why stray so far from the original and best work?

Part of the above passage has been quoted before over the years. For our purposes, however, not only is the point about the craft of car- or poetry-making significant, but also the idea of specifications versus models of the best. As you will see below, contemporary How To books include both to varying degrees; that is, a list of rules, tips, clues, pathways, triggers (the terms vary) and also a portion of examples to inspire or emulate (depending on the publisher's budget to cover copyright costs).

Before we leave the idea of the master/expert, it is worth noting that the proliferation of How To books in Australia has partly been driven by the cult of celebrity of the late twentieth century. In the US, Stephen King has *On Writing: A memoir* (King 2002), a How To guide for popular wannabes; Bryce Courtenay in Australia runs workshop weekends. John Marsden has done both: produced a text and developed his Tye Estate in Victoria where he runs a variety of workshop activities for young people and adults.

A serviceable analogy for this phenomenon is the cult of the celebrity chef and the cooking show. The star offers an atmosphere of success: *Here is my recipe - for getting started, for being inspired, for planning a sexy soufflé of a story - and now you can try this at home with a copy of my How To guide.* Marketing add-ons may also include videos; for example, Geoff Goodfellow's *Triggers* (Goodfellow 1992) has a video extension.

c) Teaching Resources

Writers produce these books as well for their own convenience; one of the needs mentioned in the beginning of this paper was the text as teaching resource. There are pedagogical reasons for turning to the How To guide. Many Australian writers teach external or online university workshops as well as in the community. Teachers are tired of spending hours and dollars photocopying handouts that they use yearly. Why not update, collate and revise as a polished text?

Copyright regulations are one reason why this option is not more widespread. If the examples are mostly by other writers, the publisher and author must pay to use them (Copyright Agency Limited 2003).

Applications must be made directly to the copyright holder or to CAL if it has the authority in each case. Certainly, within universities the generating of reading and exercise handbooks has been a trend in the past ten years, because overseas texts are at once prohibitively expensive and culturally exclusive. There is little if any Australian content. Teachers in educational institutions are restricted, however, by not being able to reproduce more than 10% of any complete work without having to pay (Copyright Agency Limited 2003).

Writer-teachers in the community have fewer options. They do not have the resources of a university printing service or a bookshop and so are more likely to consider gathering and revising their materials and generating their own examples for a formal text.

Ron Pretty, formerly of Wollongong University, describes his essay collection, *Practical Poetics* (Pretty 2003), as a natural result of the successful workshop series he has run for years in New South Wales. Carmel Bird's two books and, in particular, *Dear Writer* (1988), come from her extensive experience working in the community, as an assessor and at the Victorian Writers' Centre. In her introduction, she explains the impetus to produce a How To in this way:

> My students have sometimes wished for a book that would not only provide advice about skills, but would somehow urge and inspire the reader to write and continue to write… I have worked as a manuscript assessor, and the letters in *Dear Writer* were inspired by correspondence I had with writers… (Bird 1988: 1, 3)

Bill Manhire's Mutes and Earthquakes: Bill Manhire's creative writing course at Victoria (Manhire 1997) is an exception, since its purpose seems as much to publicise the creative writing program at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, and its successful students, as to offer a manual for writing. Manhire edited and contributes the introduction, but past students contribute the rest. That said, there are many excellent strategies presented for both poetry and prose. The subtext is that the course must work because these are the results.

The co-editor of *TEXT*, Tess Brady, is herself the co-author of two How To (or Self-Help) books, though not in this field. She said she was aware of a US trend by academic writing teachers (which in fact started in the 1970s) to 'put their teaching notes into a book which they sell each year to students, get royalties on and also publication kudos. But in Australia such publications do not get RQ [Research Quantum]' (Brady 2005). A dilemma for the writing teacher connected with an institution then is that certain books do not attract Federal research funding points. That can present a disincentive when pressure is on the writer as an employee to produce a publication that adds to the revenue of the employing organisation and increases promotion prospects, or which, for the author, would also enable them to produce a much-needed teaching resource.

A writing teacher in a medium-to-large-size American university setting their own text in a topic could count on enough sales to make a How To book viable, and benefit if the text were then set in other universities. In Australia, we don't have a similar-size market on which to rely. We need Australian content in our books but that would seem to rule out interest from the US publishers. This is a real problem for the would-be writer of a How To. A solution might be to aim a book at the Australian, Canadian

and New Zealand markets. Award-winning Canadian novelist, Jack Hodgins, merges Australian and Canadian perspectives in his well-regarded text, *A Passion for Narrative* (1993).

Finally, there is a growing tendency for publishers to make electronic and/or print versions of Teacher's Notes available as aids, especially for children's books as well as for other literature (see the Harper Collins or Lothian websites, for example). Some of these might contain writing exercises; this was the case for two young adult novels by one of this paper's authors (see *Beyond Blue* Kroll 1998 and *Riding the Blues* Kroll 2001). We are not aware of Internet add-ons of this kind for Australasian print-based How To Write texts, however. Some kind of subscription- or license-based service of this kind would be possible - in other words, if you bought the right How To book, you might conceivably also get to sign on for online newsletters or even receive tips direct from the author. Perhaps that's the next thing to stretch the exhausted author. (Note 1)

3 A Few Examples of Targeting a Market

As we remarked earlier, the twenty-three titles by Australasians surveyed in this paper showed distinct differences in identifying an intended readership. Here we look at some that identified different audiences, and how the authors signalled their target readers. Firstly, we consider books for schools, secondly, for the community and, thirdly, for the lone writer.

For Schools

Rory Harris and Peter McFarlane, both poets, produced five volumes between 1975 and 1988. They were writers involved in teaching at schools, one formally and the other informally: McFarlane was a trained teacher, and Harris trained later. Their output varied, with some books aimed more specifically than others at the How To Write reader. It is interesting, however, to look at all five volumes - not least because it shows how their books serve different needs and collectively define a writing career in this area.

The first book, *Orange Moon*, was co-authored by Garth Boomer and McFarlane (Boomer & McFarlane1975). An anthology of poems aimed at schools, it contained a thematic coding system at the back and there was also a complementary audio tape available. The second book, *Taking a Chance* (Harris 1981), was an anthology of student poems selected by Harris from his workshop activities, and the other three titles were joint efforts by Harris and McFarlane - there seems to be no particular How To Write angle at this point. The third, *A Book to Perform Poems By* (Harris & McFarlane 1985), was indexed as 'juvenile literature'; in its brief introduction there is no indication of the intended readership beyond this reference to age and an expected interest in performance poetry. The text comprises poems, several on the themes of teaching and learning, with occasional short notes on how they can be 'used'. The authors had accumulated a range of work from teaching on which they capitalised in creating a resource. We have the beginnings of the instructive text, one that can be partly employed as an aid to the teaching of writing, but which was constructed from a writer's point of view rather than only to meet the needs of an educational system.

Their next venture, *A Book to Write Poems By* (Harris & McFarlane 1986), opens with Harris mentioning a teacher who requested 'a list of methodologies that would invite her students to make poems' (Harris &

McFarlane 1986: 2). He comments that 'too many methodologies are concerned with turning out sausages', whereas he and McFarlane intend to 'share our experiences, our ideas on poetry inside and outside of the classroom' (1986: 2). For his part, McFarlane states that the book is 'a cookbook with twenty-six "tried and true" recipes for the making of poems, together with comments on "cooking" by the two cooks' (1986: 2). Though the text is obviously pitched at students and teachers, he adds that 'all of these sections can be used by all age groups' (1986: 2). The cooking metaphor was alive and well in the 1980s, and the target audience was as wide as possible. The last book by the pair is *Making the Magic* (McFarlane & Harris 1988), an anthology of student poems featuring more anecdotes and comments by the authors, who claim that the book is 'written for everyone: we are writing for you, adults as well as students' (McFarlane & Harris 1988, Introduction). It returns to the teaching aid agenda of the second book.

Collectively, the titles show the authors' growing intentions to meet the needs of school teachers (since they were working in various capacities in schools at the time) as well as a reluctance to be seen as purely school-driven. This overview is instructive as it shows authorial response to opportunity and need. Their wish to expand the audience probably emanates from their belief that poetry should be enjoyed and practised by everyone; that poetry needs to be liberated from stultifying analysis.

Harris and McFarlane's subtext is that poetry writing, reading and performing are activities certainly appropriate in schools, but they are also life-enhancing and should extend beyond the school grounds and school years. The relaxed layout, the cartoons and the presentation of exercises as suggestions support this ethos. Furthermore, the fact that the authors do not pepper each book with a preponderance of their own poems reinforces this idea that poetry is not an elite art restricted to a few, as does the eclectic selection, mixing established and student writers. These texts seem to say that they do not exist to publicise the authors' works or personalities. It is an egalitarian approach.

Another author who has aimed at schools is Geoff Goodfellow. His *Triggers* (1992) bears the subtitle, *Turning Experiences into Poetry*. What does this say to the potential reader? That they already have all the material they need to produce poetry? The blurb on the back cover emphasises both craft and inspiration, and the chance to be

> …in the presence of someone who is highly competent and willing to show you how…[t]he result is a unique, dynamic and educational enticement to the many apprentice writers in Australia. Teachers will welcome it and students will love it! (Garth Boomer in Goodfellow 1992, back cover)

Triggers started out as a publication of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English, so it has a direct connection as a teaching resource. In that same year (1992), a South Australian publisher, Wakefield Press, took it up for release in an edited and more lavish form. Goodfellow states that the book is 'for writers from young adult upwards,' and that it 'treats poetry writing as a serious activity, without relying on technical jargon' (Goodfellow 1992, Preface). Trading on Goodfellow's profile as an energetic performer, it also uses his own writing experiences as illustrations of process. He 'asks his readers to use their "ordinary" experiences to write their own poems' (Goodfellow 1992, Preface), but this is a book squarely based on a particular poet's personality.

So, we are in little doubt about the intended readership here; we know that this pretends to be a theory-free text, and we know that the author espouses the notion of writing from experience. The sum effect is to suggest a non-threatening writing process for beginners. Goodfellow offers a walking tour of some of his poems, commenting on their development and intentions. There are a few prompts to readers to think about a particular task that might lead to a poem. For example, after a page on which a poem appears with explanatory notes, Goodfellow suggests thinking of any word that the reader's friends tend to use and then trying to write down as many sayings as possible that typically include that word. The idea is to generate a bank of material that could be turned into a poem. Such suggestions are not set out regularly in the text and in some cases there are featured poems with no corresponding exercises at all.

Triggers seems to be one of those texts more clearly intended to enhance the poet's reputation as well as his or her income. The predictable placement of exercises is a matter of taste but for use in class teachers might prefer a more regular approach. This variation highlights one of the assumptions that we bring to How To Write texts. Another might be whether a How To book needs any exercises at all. That would be a question for readers and teachers to ponder.

For the Community

Community writing groups are alive and well all over Australia. What they seem to lack is a simple, non-threatening guide to starting out in several writing genres; one that offers clearly-structured activities that can be tackled in a group without necessarily having a teacher/facilitator present. That was the thinking behind *Lift Off!: An Introductory Course in Creative Writing* (Evans & Deller-Evans 2002). The book was written in order to collect materials used in community centres' writing classes into a handy form, one that might also be used by individuals looking for a structured introduction to different genres.

The authors' rationale is immediately obvious. Their emphasis is on practice not theory, and the intended readership is made very clear. The text alternates ideas with lots of exercises, and illustrative texts are relatively few, which was due to copyright cost issues (see earlier in this paper). The authors' profiles are not an issue but rather the perceived usefulness of the text itself pertains.

For the Lone Writer

Graeme Kinross-Smith maintains that his book, *Writer* (Kinross-Smith 1992), is 'something of a workshop in print' (Kinross-Smith 1992: xii). In fact, he offers what seems to be a manifesto for How To books:

> Books like this should provide an environment in which the professional writer's experience allows new writers to understand strengths and weaknesses in writing technique earlier than they would otherwise. In short, this book can provide a more efficient means of learning to write and gaining expertise. It cannot provide the personal spark that produces good writing, but it will uncover a spark that might otherwise have been smothered by lack of confidence, lack of opportunity, or by the sheer demands of daily living. Work with this book can provide confidence and fulfilment in ways that may surprise you. (Kinross-Smith 1992: xii)

How do we tell what the ideal content and layout is for this kind of book? Do exercises matter? Should we bother even asking, since there is no hard evidence on these issues and only sales levels or reader surveys (if we could isolate the dominant points of satisfaction) would throw any light on the questions. On the other hand, the authors of such books necessarily make decisions about these components when they put their texts together. Do they merely produce what they, personally, prefer or what students in workshops have asked for?

Putting aside the awkward phrase about uncovering a spark (readers would already believe it exists and want it fanned into a flame, otherwise why would they have picked up the book?), the 'demands of daily living' plague professionals and novices alike, reducing writing opportunity. One of the things a text can do is to provide the first or subsequent assignments, taking the pressure off the writer who faces that interminable query: What do I write today? The last claim about writer confidence may be what matters most to some readers.

In an echo of other How To books, Kinross-Smith says, '*Writer* starts from the premise that your raw material in story-telling is *your* experience expressed in *your* words' (Kinross-Smith 1992: xii). This valuing of the personal might be psychologically sound as it privileges what is already known; it encourages the reader to think, 'I already have the material; I'm on my way. I really can be a writer!' Whether this is actually true will be discussed in the next section about theory and texts.

Kinross-Smith continues to tell readers that 'the emphasis is on getting started, brainstorming, putting words on paper, going through the creative mess that enables you to see what your story will be' (Kinross-Smith 1992: xiii). *Writer* claims to be intentionally structured for progressive development of 'word use' through what Kinross-Smith regards as deeper 'analysis and practice of language and storytelling' (xiv). This underlines his earlier statement that the book functions as a workshop guide.

In the range of texts mentioned in this section we have some for schools, the community and the solitary writer that are distinguished to some degree by an increasing emphasis on the presence of the book's author. It would appear impossible, however, to predict any strong correlation between this aspect and the intended readership. What the books do all have in common is a claim to be user-friendly, and that they all focus on craft without the complications of jargon or theory.

> ...we only have to be placed in a situation with trust, time, space and a few other things like pens and paper, and write. (Harris & McFarlane 1986: 2)
>
> Triggers...treats poetry writing as a serious activity, without relying on technical jargon. (Goodfellow 1992: Preface)
>
> We have pared down the content of this book to emphasise writing practice more than theory; we want you to have fun. (Evans & Deller-Evans 2002: 9)
>
> ...in the final analysis writers, as distinct from students of literature or practitioners of literary theory, do not need criticism, which can, at worst, distract them from their art. (Kinross-Smith 1992: xv)

Some of these statements are more direct than others about putting theory aside. As any good theorist would argue, writing without mention of theory is itself a theoretical approach. Why do these Australasian authors adopt such a posture? As far as *Lift Off!* was concerned, minimising overt theory was a direct response to community writers' prior statements that theory was difficult and of little importance to them; that is, the editorial decision resulted from listening to the readership beforehand.

4 Are 'How To' Books a Theory-Free Zone?

We have been talking a lot so far about needs - the writers', the audience's - needs pedagogical and financial. But what about theory? Certainly anyone engaged in criticism nowadays, in fact anyone contemplating a higher degree in creative writing, has to be aware of theory, even if they are not converts to a particular tribe such as the poststructuralists or the new historicists. In Australia our discipline has been theorising its practice and its brand of research for more than ten years. As well as our multiple identities, supervisors and students have been juggling that new textual beast, 'the exegesis', and phrases such as 'research equivalence', 'research through practice', and 'research fiction'. They are trying not only to pin down what they mean but also to convince bureaucrats and colleagues outside our discipline of the significance of the work.

Where's the Theory?

Here are two questions that emanate from our discipline's new profile. Can a text focused on craft be making no assumptions about the nature of writing or the writer; that is, can it be entirely theory-free? Further, does a theory exist to explain books that purport to teach not only the students, but also their teachers? These questions apply to books used not only in educational institutions, but community writing groups, which often have rotating leaders. More particularly, do readers want theoretical content?

We know that some titles in this field, such as Hodgins (Hodgins 1992), do spend some time on theory but there was relatively little of it in the Australasian books surveyed for this paper. Let us start with the exception, however, which is also the newest book on the block, *The Writing Experiment: Strategies for Innovative Creative Writing* (2005), by Hazel Smith, which specifically raises the issue of theory. In her introduction, she clearly identifies the target audience as university students and staff and the goals that result from this focus.

> [The book's] aims are to suggest systematic strategies for creative writing, and to theorise the process of writing by relating it to the literary and cultural concepts which students encounter on other university courses. The book is based on the premise that creative writing can be systematically and analytically approached, and that successful work does not arise only from talent or inspiration. (Smith 2005: vii)

As we have said, this upfront grappling with writing as a topic in a university context and, hence, necessarily affected by theoretical discourses, is new. In fact, both authors only received the text in the last few weeks.

Much more common, however, is the craft orientation, the one that presumes that a skills-based topic and theory must somehow conflict.

There is no argument, however, with the last part of Smith's assertion - that 'successful' writing is not dependent merely on inspiration or talent. For example, in his introduction to *Practical Poetics* (2003), Ron Pretty asserts the following about the book's intentions, which has a broader audience than the university community:

> …the emphasis in the Workshop is more on practical outcomes than on theoretical considerations…
> [Hence, the book aims to]…provide poets with practical approaches to their own poetry as well as that of others.
> (Pretty 2003: 1)

As teacher-writers, we are entirely sympathetic to this approach. As academics, we hear a niggling voice in our heads, a bit like an annoying magpie whose specialty is bricolage - a bit of this here, a bit of that there. It squawks: If 'no text is innocent', then *ipso facto* 'no textbook is innocent'. Can contemporary writers be working in a vacuum? There is always an underlying agenda, underlying assumptions about what literature is, what poetry is, what a good novel is. In other words, we always assign value. Theoretical underpinnings are hidden when a writer says, 'I want to focus on the practical'. The practice and our manner of assessing the quality of what we ask our students to write are dependent upon theoretical assumptions.

For example, many authors have stated that they want novices to begin writing from personal experience. So far, so good. But some enjoin them to do so consistently (note the blurb on Goodfellow's cover), as if work produced from personal experience rather than from 'pure' imagination (if such a faculty exists) were more credible and hence superior to other types. It privileges the first-person narrative or limited first-person point of view. This position is in fact based on a theory - that life experience and hence realistic fiction is the best and most genuine type. It is humanistic; it encourages the actualisation of the individual; in fact, it presumes that there is such a thing as a stable character. Further, it presumes that literature is most universal when it engages on a personal level. By implication, it suggests that individuals, not cultures, determine their own fates. Whether or not we (or our readers) agree with this particular approach, it reinforces the argument that a theoretical dimension exists. Writers engage with theory even if they do so unwittingly.

Caveats and Disclaimers

Perhaps fear of being held to account for theories that pronounce on the nature of value in our culture have made the convention of the disclaimer so frequent in the prefaces or introductions of How To books. They are the contemporary equivalent of the apologia, and take various forms, but most seem to claim that supplying advice and expertise does not have to involve theory and that in any event the students don't want to know. Sometimes authors emphasise that although their books are meant to be guides to writing, there are no guarantees the suggestions will work - it's up to 'you'.

Is it apocryphal that 'only 2% of those who buy How To books act on' the advice? The corollary then would be that the rest are simply dreamers, but what's wrong with providing readers with material to feed those dreams? Why clutter the dream with theory?

So far, the texts we have come across that do engage to an extent with the question of what literature is and how we assign value to it are collections of essays. Examples of this type are Pretty's *Practical Poetics* (2003) and

Brenda Walker's *The Writer's Reader: A Guide to Writing Poetry and Fiction* (Walker 2002). It is true, also, that the advantage of a multi-author collection, aside from having a diverse range of well-written articles, is that readers are exposed either explicitly or implicitly to more than one perspective. Editors can encourage contributors to air strong opinions, knowing that 1) they will be balanced by other points of view or theories, and 2) the editor won't be castigated for them.

Common Strategies

Given that our title says that we are going to reveal *how* to write a How To book, below is a summary of some of the most common strategies in our sample.

Ten Common Strategies - or a Formula for Producing a How To (patent pending)

1. The author says this book is about craft. The advice is practical and so there will be no theory and no jargon. E.g.:

> …the emphasis in the Workshop is more on practical outcomes than on theoretical considerations (Pretty 2003 1)

2. The author says don't follow my advice slavishly; these are only suggestions. This disclaimer resembles those on ABC Radio's *Talkback Gardening* or *Ask the Vet* type programs, which begin, 'The following program is general in nature. You should always consult a professional for advice'. So is the author not a professional? This strategy flows over into the anti-advice ruse, perfected by Jenny Wagner in *On Writing Books for Children* (Wagner 1992):

> Writers who set out to write books on writing are aware of the dangers of what they are doing and arm themselves beforehand. They explain right at the beginning that if they have carelessly mentioned a rule or two it was purely accidental, and readers should take no notice. (Wagner 1992: 4)

3. The author refers the reader to childhood reading/reciting/writing experiences, and then other life experience as inspiration and/or source material. E.g.:

> My father used to amuse us with snippets of funny language, too…
> On long boring car trips I amused myself by reading the clever language of billboards, so often based on puns, ono-matopoeia [sic] or alliteration…
> These days, if you walk into my house you won't have to look far to realise my interest in language. (Marsden 1993: 4, 5)

4. The author relies on the 'This is how I learned to do it' approach. Sometimes this is followed by the 'you can do it, too' line. E.g.:

> One way to get started is to think about what stories you liked reading as a child… For years I was haunted by a story, without knowing its source… I did tend to like "weepy" stories as a child, and perhaps (to some extent, anyway) I write them now. Jot down what you can remember of your early reading: it may help you in your quest for a story. (Nilsson 1992: 7)

5. The author explains the benefits of revision, feedback, editorial help or workshop decorum. Good writers never get it right the first time. E.g.:

> ...a writer who drafts a story then culls about three quarters of it and starts again from the remainder [is on the right track] (Evans & Deller-Evans 2002: 133)

6. The author reinforces his or her point by quoting other (often famous) writers, tells stories about them, refers to their works:

> The thing that emerges most clearly from the comments made by writers is that usually, not only do they not plan, but they do not even know what is coming until they have the first draft in front of them.
> Here, for example, is Judith Wright, one of Australia's leading poets... (Pretty 2001: 14)

7. The author offers exercises - or if they feel the term is too formal - hints, triggers, clues or suggestions. These usually appear at the end of chapters, but they can appear at the end of sections or on the side in-boxes:

> ...try writing a simple three-verse blues, using the model below. (Kinross-Smith 1992: 31)

8. The author uses key phrases: 'inspiration', 'secret' and 'getting started' are favourites. Some of these phrases can appear as inducements on the cover:

> The elusive formula of popular fiction is at Alan Gold's finger tips... (Walker 2002: back cover)

9. The author is either up-front about the target audience (students, teachers, freelancers, young adults, etc.) or claims that the book is for everyone. This might or might not mean including material on 'the market':

> *Who can use this book?*
> If you've already written a story and you know that it needs more work, this book will... (Grenville 1990: xiii)

> *The Writer's Reader* is designed for university students enrolled in creative writing courses and for their teachers. (Walker 2002: vii)

10. The author's individuality is most often reflected in the structure of the text, not necessarily the contents. A different sequence of material creates a different learning experience. Whatever the sequence, it needs to be logical. A clear table of contents with meaningful subheadings can either entice or deter a potential reader.

> FIRST WORDS
> 'How do I know what I think until I see what I say?'
> *Getting started. Experience and ideas: telling about them*
> (Kinross-Smith 1992: Contents)

Conclusion

Some aspects of writing a How To Write book seem clear from our survey, even though they remain to be tested against a larger range of books. The Australasian books employ common strategies to attract readers, including emphasising the knowledge and experience of the authors, the user-friendliness of the text (logical structure, simple layout, conversational tone, etc), and general avoidance of theory (Don't scare away the fish?). The content is a mixture of anecdote, philosophy, illustrative writings, quotations from successful writers, and writing exercises that allow a sense of development. The authors are generally clear about announcing whom they expect to be their readers.

All of these things are evident from examining the books themselves. It is not always as obvious why the authors invested their energy in producing the books, however. Sensible conjecture suggests that some writers are diversifying their effort, having established themselves as writers of imaginative literature, and perhaps trying to trade on their existing profile as successful writers in the public eye. Writers often make their motivation clear as far as identifying and serving a readership, but seldom state, 'I need the money' or 'I am trying to trade on my reputation', or anything to that effect - which would be repugnant to readers.

We are conscious that our study is based on a selected group of Australasian titles only, and that the particular recipe we have outlined is limited by that range as well as by personal preferences and our experiences as writers and teachers. Overseas texts vary because of the market size and often the educational context.

If there were a secret to writing a very successful How To Write book we would be doing it. In the meantime, we will be extending our investigation to include overseas books, talking with publishers, and delving deeper into the minds of the authors and readers.

Notes

DL Nelson's periodic electronic newsletter manipulates the writing teacher/pupil relationship in a clever way. It is sent free to subscribers but also to those who haven't subscribed but seem to be on email lists of what we might call "interested parties (ie., heads of writing programs, etc.). At the end of a recent edition, "W3 Writing Degrees - Do You Need Them?", she advertises a how to be a freelance writer workshop in Switzerland with cost and registration details. Cyberspace readers have had a taste of her teaching methods, and now can take advantage of the full experience - for a price. (DL Nelson 24/10/04 from DL NELSON wordcoach101@hotmail.com. Accessed 24/10/04 - sent via email to Jeri.Kroll@flinders.edu.au). New email: donna-lane.nelson@wanadaoo.fr; website: www. wisewordsonwriting.com. Return to article

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TEXT
Vol 9 No 1 April 2005
http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
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