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Respectable or Risqué: Creative Writing Programs in the Marketplace

I wish to place our creative writing programs in a broad (yet specific) social context so that we might be able to use their very contradictions as a way forward from the intersection we currently occupy; that is, between establishing the creative arts (in particular creative writing) as a fixture in the academy, and a future which, without thinking about it, could become standardized in its own unreconstructed respectability without enough publishing opportunities for our students.

At this point it needs to be said that our programs have had many successes, judged by the standard of publication outcomes. For example, at my university (the University of Adelaide, under the mentorship of Tom Shapcott) there is a shelf of published books, which have come out of the program.

Even so, publication is not the only outcome of creative writing courses. Nevertheless, what I am concerned about is 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.

Part of my inspiration for this paper came from email correspondence with a friend and former student Caroline Tiffany, who recently won the unpublished section of the Victorian Premier's Prize for her novel *The Cultivator*. Before winning the award she told me that pretty well every publisher had rejected it with remarks such as, 'no one wants to read about rural Australia anymore'. I told her that they were mad and that most publishers today reflect fashion more than they make things happen. In any case, some of the same people who rejected her are now ringing up. Caroline's case may well end happily, but it will not for many others, because we are seeing a growing constriction on the ability of new authors to break through.

Let's back-track over the past three decades or so in terms of Australian literary culture. What have been the changes and the on-going difficulties?

Australian publishing has changed dramatically. The percentage of locally-generated sales has risen greatly since the early 1970s, partly as the result of the wave in cultural nationalism initiated by the Whitlam Labor Government of 1972-75. The changes were an example of late cultural modernization in a relatively archaic publishing marketplace. The

Australian middle class lost part of its cultural cringe during that time, there were developments such as small presses run on political and gender lines, major events such as Patrick White's win in the Nobel Prize in 1973 and the on-going subsidies to publishers by the Literature Board of the Australia Council throughout nearly three decades. These were largely interventions in the marketplace modelled on the activities of the Canada Council. (1)

Yet in the 1970s the academy was still coming to terms with the teaching of Australian literature as a worthwhile contribution to their programs, (2) let alone contemplating the teaching of creative writing. It was not merely a story of nationalism, because, along with the opening of the economy in the 1980s, came the internationalisation of the broader culture marked by some penetration by Australian writers into global marketplaces. A growing demand by local readers for local products led to major British and US multinationals setting up more active publishing programs compared to the 1960s when, to take Penguin Australia as an example, local publishing had been a gesture to an export market for British publishers.

Moving to a more grassroots or micro level, I contend then, that the many small presses and literary publications of the 1970s and early 80s, were the feeding ground, and home, for the new writers of the time; many of whom became established names by the conclusion of the 1980s. Writers such as Peter Carey, Judith Rodriguez, Finola Moorhead, Ania Walwicz, Frank Moorhouse, Gig Ryan, Alan Wearne and Les Murray are some of the more obvious examples. (See selected list of small magazines of the period.)

These small presses and magazines were the equivalent of our contemporary creative writing classes in finding and encouraging potential writers, and the unpolished examples from that period are evidence of those small magazines giving writers the chance to think on the page and, in some cases, experiment with form and content. Reading your work against the work of others, often more accomplished, was an education in itself free of the potential stringencies of grades; something to look back on and something to aim for. In a sense then, many of those small magazines were projects in the making, rather than sophisticated destinations, as is the case today where it seems we are more anxious and more blasé about whether anyone is reading us.

The small magazines of the 1970s had a strange position in relationship to the wider book trade. Their amateurish appearance meant that their commodification was never easy or necessarily desired. Some writers resisted 'co-modification' either from necessity and / or intention. The poet Jas H. Duke once said that the *Age* never reviewed him because his publications were stapled. Pi.O. insisted on printing books and magazines (e.g. *9 to 5*) that were deliberately grotty, so that he'd never become part of 'the establishment.' (3). *Inprint*, edited by Bill Turner, Nigel Krauth et al (the short story magazine which published early Tim Winton, Brian Castro and many others) was stapled, but it had an influence greater than its circulation figures might have suggested. *Hecate* (edited by Carole Ferrier) in Brisbane was also stapled and had a wide influence.

Some of the editors, say of *Magic Sam* and *Ear in a Wheatfield*, weren't concerned in the least because they were not interested in bookshop sales, whereas my magazine *Contempa*, along with *Luna* (edited by a collective led by Barbara Giles), in Melbourne, and *New Poetry* (edited by Cheryl Adamson) in Sydney, wanted readers and Literature Board assistance, and

bookshops were necessary pick-up points, so we had nicely-designed covers and perfect binding. In contrast, the earlier magazines of the late 1960s were largely roneoed, primarily because the revolution in offset printing hadn't as yet taken on. Letterpress printing was still widespread until the late 60s.

Another difference between then and now was that publication of sorts was the validation of peers (and a few readers) compared to today where academic structures can sometimes be the only validation. Currently an active idea of a readership is some distance away for many creative writing students.

There appears to be another interesting difference. The new writers of the 1970s were especially thankful for publication in stapled publications. Leaving aside the revolution in desktop capacity, I suspect that, these days, many students and writers want publication in glossy, expensive formats… which brings me to the vexed question of why bother with print when the IT evangelicals have shown how cheap and accessible web-based publication can be: that it is, ideally, a deconstruction of old ideas of the marketplace and the physical frustrations of distribution.

But 'virtual' publication will never be the whole story (leaving aside notions of performance as publication) because as in 'real' sex (or life), people, in their reading, want tactile experience (many in fact want to do it in bed) and they don't mind going on a date to a bookshop to pick it up. Furthermore, web publishing is a cheap alternative for institutions and government agencies. So then, I am arguing for a publishing climate that tries to satisfy all manner of expectations.

In such a climate, are we becoming unwitting servants of an homogenising marketplace, particularly if that market has largely abrogated responsibility for the survival and promotion of endangered literary forms such as poetry and the short story, two genres we wilfully and rightly insist on preserving in our courses?

What are we teaching and how does it relate to this general picture?

Most of our courses provide students with a wide range of writing models, but by third year of the undergraduate degree at least, publishable standard becomes a byword. But is 'publishable' shorthand for both clean editorial copy AND what we imagine will sell to mainstream publishers?

We imagine that our institutions achieve validation in that moment when we integrate with market expectations. But that can be an unexamined and superficial victory. I would have no problem with such victories if they weren't largely the only victories and if we had many more literary magazines and more people responsible for editorial decisions.

Mathew Gargo, in critiquing what he regards as the 'naturalizing' assumptions of the creative writing program at the University of Wisconsin (and in reference to the US) suggests that 'what the nation needs is a series of non-profit literary journals…willing to publish fiction that is radical, progressive and transformational'. (4) He goes on to speak of a number of American small presses who 'are disseminating and promoting new work but are also preserving authors whose books are headed towards out of print obscurity'. (5) There are echoes here in Australia, of course, and we have heard it all before, as a major narrative of the 60s and 70s, in the stories of redress and affirmation, including feminism.

But there is a strategic difference between then and now; that is, the use of 'centre' and 'periphery' in cultural formations has become more problematic with the rise of identity politics as opposed to class and gender divisions - and previously radical experimental, non-linear narratives have lost much of their 'transgressive' clout since the 1970s. (6)

Currently, the previously-designated margins are moving in and out of a revolving centre in a desperate search for new marketing opportunities. Unlike the 1960s, middle-class readers aren't easily scandalized any more and, for all the new tolerance, Australian book publishing is still dominated by four or five large conglomerates.

Gargo claims that we should 'free ourselves from the value of writing as a commodity' and, to ease 'this problem in the creative writing program, the students should be allowed to write texts that have no hope of being "commodities"'. (7)

We do this, of course, consciously and unconsciously, by design and lack of design - and for whatever reason, most of our students do not produce marketable products. But it would also be irresponsible of us in turn to privilege the assumption that attracting readers is somehow un-pure and / or inscribing the literary publication as a type of limited other to the market. It would also be foolish to throw up our hands and leave it to others, because one of the consequences could 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.

My concern, thirty years after the creation of the Australia Council, is the creation of a writing that communicates and speaks to readers in different formats and locations using forms of publication that are 'commodities' and also some that resist 'co-modification', and to do that we cannot ignore questions of dissemination, distribution and pedagogy.

In 2001 Frank Moorhouse accused the sector of creating dream factories that were unsupported by the publishing industry - of in effect, creating unrequited expectations. (8) He was right and wrong, because his conclusions were predicated on a relative acceptance of existing industry structures, and a notion that the graduates from creative writing programs should only become writers, when in fact we also produce teachers, readers and citizens. Even so, his was a timely warning.

A brief history of the established literary magazines is also important at this point if the macro is to have any micro relevance.

Of those magazines that have survived into the new millennium, all have had generous assistance from the Australia Council and some form of institutional support from universities: *Meanjin* from Melbourne University; *Southerly* from Sydney University; *Overland*, more recently from Victoria University of Technology; and *Westerly* from the University of Western Australia. Of the others, supported by the Australia Council during the 1970s and 80s, pretty well all of them could not survive because they lacked institutional support of one kind or another. Few of the surviving magazines have been able to pay an editor so that publication has largely been a labour of love built on individual surplus value.

Also, the history of literary magazines in this country is really the story of heroic individuals such as Clem Christesen, Laurie Hergenhan, Stephen Murray-Smith, Max Harris, and Grace Perry among others. So then, a

stronger footing has to be created which is no longer largely dependent on the overworked passions of a few people if literary magazines are to in some way match the modernization that has taken place in the overall book trade. Literary magazines have always been in crisis mode - surviving, as does poetry, in a climate of militant neglect - and their desperation has matched our acceptance of that situation as the 'natural' order of things.

Another striking feature is the monumentalism inscribed in the artefact that is the literary magazine: 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, or so the story goes. Such formats require high levels of taxpayer support, and yet they remain in permanent crisis. The paper stock of *Meanjin* and *Southerly*, for example, is close to the most expensive available, so where then is the money from the Australia Council actually going? I still believe that it is largely going to printers. Academics mightn't worry about such things but most writers do. 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?

So, 'we have come of age', and the break-through, nationalistic phase for creative writing courses has taken on an element of self-congratulation, at a time when we need to think about the kind of structures a new generation of writers will need so as to make their mark. To leave that to the market could be fatal for the future, as it has been in the past; and to only talk of our current success could be foolish. What can be done and what role can our universities play?

Unfortunately in most cases the re-creation of the old university press model is fraught with institutional constraints and competing pressures, with the notable exception of the University of Western Australia Press who have recently decided to expand their list to include books by promising authors produced by creative writing programs. But the problem of a thin market for poetry and short stories remains, and one possible solution is that we play a part in encouraging our local writers' centres in each state to produce regular literary magazines, as a central part of their reason for existence, and provide them with assistance where possible.

The history of writers' centres is also instructive. Created, as I understand it, out of the iniatives of the community writing movement of the late 1970s and early 80s, they were a move towards providing resource centres and meeting places for isolated writers. It was argued that they could promote the work of marginal writers and provide a support network for them.

They have served that function, but they could also be read as token gestures towards the large number of amateurs who dabble, and more crucially, to the creation of the illusion that publishing in Australia is more heterogenous than it actually is.

My suggestion is that the Australia Council makes its funding conditional on the writers' centres publishing some kind of regular literary publication (other than their newsletters). They have structures - offices, meeting rooms, membership and distribution lists, existing staff trained in desktop publishing, some in-kind support from our institutions, and so forth. I respectfully suggest that in the last decade or so we have seen enough

short courses and master classes emanating from writers' centres to last into the next century!

Which brings me to competitions as sites of titillation, or indeed (in terms of those for poetry and the short story) the heroic intravenous drip of our literary culture - and by this I don't mean any of the major book prizes around the country. Competitions, of course, attract sponsors, involve local councils, community organizations, and in a tokenistic way, newspapers, in the discovery of new writers, but they can be an excuse for not focusing on the underlying structures which make and determine a culture. Few of the winning stories are published, for example. Competitions, on the whole, encourage a winner-take-all mentality - a kind of well-meaning search for celebrity; a titillation, that 'You too, can be an Australian literary idol'.

Returning to how to create opportunities for more writers (including our students), the production of the writers' centres magazines would no longer just be reliant on the surplus value of dedicated volunteers. Production editors and editorial committees would be paid. Editorial committees could consist of a mix of representatives from our institutions, respected writers independent of any particular structure, and from the writers' centres themselves. The magazines would have both national and local sensibilities. Clearly writers in the respective states would be comfortable submitting where they are, but the magazines should also have a national / international focus given that Australia Council funds are involved. Potentially, under such a plan there would be at least ten new literary magazines opening up paid outlets for prose writers and poets. Writer's centres might like to specialise - some doing the short story, or poetry, or play script, or memoir / non fiction, or mixed etc, whatever is the local interest and strength.

There are publishing models already in existence - A4 magazine formats using relatively cheap paper stock, such as the *Australian Book Review* - and there have been more radical precedents that moved away from the literary magazine as a monumental gesture. For example, between the late 1970s and the late 1980s, *Tabloid Story* deconstructed the notion that a literary magazine had to look like a book or booklet. As an adjunct to newspapers and magazines such as the *Bulletin*, the *National Times*, and local and student publications, it popularised the contemporary short story for a brief period, and the subsidy it received from the Australia Council went to the writers and not to printers.

In saying this I am not suggesting that the *Tabloid Story* model can and should be repeated in the current climate; rather, that we need to think outside the square about the way we have constructed the literary magazine and imagine a more pro-active future for our community, institutions and students. We must encourage publishers, but we should not worship the commercial arm of the industry as the ultimate validation for our activities.

As university teachers of creative writing we are in a sense the academic version of the pro-active agent or editor. If we resist thinking about new formats, are we then further inscribing our own institutional monumentalism into the publications that further validate our contradictory, powerful, yet powerless position? Our contradictory role in the social structure can provide us with a superb vantage point through which to deconstruct and intervene in the contradiction that is publishing.

Endnotes

1. Conversation with Thomas Shapcott, Literature Board member 1973-76, Adelaide, 21/3/04. Return to article

2. See particularly the Association for the study of Australian Literature, *Inaugural Conference Documents*, Monash University, May 1978. ASAL was hardly an 'established' organisation. Return to article

3. Conversation with Pi.O., Melbourne, 2/12/84. Return to article

4. Gargo, W. Matthew, *Fiction Writing, Theory, Politics, Post-structuralism, and Progress - A Marxist critique of Creative Writing Pedagogy*, 'The Creative Writing Program and Capitalism' http://www.geocities.com/radicalpraxis/fiction/ Return to article

5. Ibid. Return to article

6. See of course Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural logic of late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1991 for the most challenging discussion. Also Edmonds, Phillip, 'Unfashionable in Literary Terms', *Overland* 153, Melbourne, 1998, for a local analysis of notions of transgression in the short story. Return to article

7. Gargo, W. Matthew, *Fiction Writing, Theory, Politics, Post-structuralism, and Progress - A Marxist critique of Creative Writing Pedagogy*, 'The Creative Writing Program and Capitalism' http://www.geocities.com/radicalpraxis/fiction/ Return to article

8. Moorhouse, Frank, 'Drowning not Waving', *Australian Author*, 33, 3 (Dec 2001): pp 8-15. Return to article

SELECTED LIST OF SMALL LITERARY MAGAZINES OF THE 1960s, 1970s AND EARLY 1980s

During the period there were many 'small' magazines of all persuasions being published. This list is of the more self-consciously 'literary' magazines. By my count, there were over 40 literary 'small magazines' operating on an on-going and intermittent basis during the period. This list includes the 'main' small magazines but I have not included the 'established' literary magazines (i.e. *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Westerly*, *Quadrant*, *Poetry Australia* and *Southerly*) in that total. This list is based on the holdings of the National Library of Australia who conducted the most accurate legal deposit scheme during the period, plus *Small Press Publishing in Australia - the early 1970s* by Michael Denholm.

AUSTRALIAN SHORT STORIES (1982-2000) ed. Bruce Pascoe.
ASPECT (1975-89) ed. Rudi Kraussman.
AUSTRALASIAN SMALL PRESS REVIEW (1975-79) eds. Tom & Wendy Whitton.
BORN TO CONCRETE (1975-) ed. Pi.O.
BRAVE NEW WORD (1981-89) ed. Peter Haddow.
CONTEMPA (1972-78) eds. Phillip Edmonds& Robert Kenny till 1975. Later Phillip Edmonds on his own.
CROSS CURRENTS (1968-69) ed. Michael Dugan.
CANBERRA POETRY (1973-) eds. Kevin Hart, Alan Gould & Phillip Mead.
DHARMA (1977-79) ed. Larry Buttrose.
DODO (1975-79) eds. Keith Shadwick, Michael Witts & Tom Thompson.
EAR IN THE WHEATFIELD, (1970-75) ed. Kris Hemensley
FREE POETRY (1968-70) eds. Nigel Roberts & John Goodall.
ETYMSPHERES, (1974-75) ed. Walter Billeter.

FITZROT (1973-77) ed. Pi.O.
GOING DOWN SWINGING (1980-) early editors were Kevin Brophy & Myron Lysenko.
HECATE (1975-) ed. Carole Ferrier.
HELIX (1978-85) ed. Les Harrop.
INPRINT (1977-86) eds. Nigel Krauth, Bill Turner, et al.
LINQ (1971-) ed. Elizabeth Perkins.
LUNA (1975-89) eds. collective led by Barbara Giles.
MAGIC SAM (1975-82) ed. Ken Bolton.
MATTOID (1977-) eds. include Brian Edwards& Robyn Gardiner.
MAKAR (1965-80) ed. Martin Duwell.
MOK (1968-69) eds. Richard Tipping & Rob Tillett.
NEW POETRY (1971-81) eds. Robert & Cheryl Adamson.
9 to 5, dates of editions unknown - believed to have published until the early 80s. ed. Pi.O.
OUR GLASS, (1968-69) ed. Kris Hemensley.
RIGMAROLE OF THE HOURS (1974-78) ed. Robert Kenny.
RIVERUNN (1976-78) ed. Brian Musgrove.
SATURDAY CLUB BOOK OF POETRY (1972-76) ed. Pat Laird.
SCRIPSI (1981-94) eds. Peter Craven & Michael Heywood.
TABLOID STORY (1972-81) editors were various over the decade in Sydney and Melbourne, including Frank Moorhouse, Michael Wilding, Carmel Kelly, Laurie Clancy, Lucy Frost, John Timlin, Caroline Lurie, Phillip Edmonds & David Kerr.
THE GREAT AUK (1968-70) ed. Charles Buckmaster.
THE TASMANIAN REVIEW (now ISLAND) (1979-80) eds. Andrew Sant & Michael Denholm.
THREE BLIND MICE (1977-79) eds. Kris Hemensley, Walter Billeter & Robert Kenny.
TRANSIT (1968-69) ed. John Tranter.
YOUR FRIENDLY FASCIST (1971-76) ed. Rae Desmond Jones.Return to article

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Notes and Debates

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