



## BOOK WORM

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY OF EDITORS (WA) INC.

May 2007

### From the chair

As is often the case when you're introduced, my conversation with someone yesterday turned to what we 'did'. When I told them I was an editor, their first response was "Oh, at what newspaper?"

I explained that 'editor' refers to more than the boss of a newspaper, and tried to explain what we (or at least I) 'do' for people. After some nodding and general murmurs of agreement, I thought they got the picture – until they cut in and asked me why my clients didn't just click the 'spell-check' button themselves and save their money.

I sighed and told them I had a special way of clicking it that gave me extra options.

This wasn't the first (and won't be the last) time I have this type of conversation. Usually they're not quite so blunt, but as a freelancer, I often have to try to explain and show the benefits of editing to sceptics, and even to authors ... and looking at the results of IPEd's recent survey, I don't think it's just me.

All respondents were sourced by editors, yet only 73% of them had used editing services, and only 57% said they knew what an editor did. Interestingly, 93.5% of those who had used an editor saw a tangible benefit, and everyone who had used an editor would consider using one again. Or in other words, they don't know what we do or how we do it, but whatever it is, once we've done it they like it and want us to keep doing it.

As you will all be aware, at our last meeting we held two important votes: whether to join IPEd and whether to accept the revised accreditation scheme. While the number of members voting was disappointingly low, both resolutions were passed (20/20 for joining IPEd, 19/20 and 1 abstention for the revised accreditation). As a committee we're choosing to take the low turnout as a silent endorsement rather than a general apathetic response to these issues.

Yesterday's conversation brought home to me one of the most basic but welcome consequences of IPEd's formation. Having a united body to represent editing means we have a better chance of being seen as a vital element of any written undertaking. We can get the message out to the general public that editing is a distinct career choice, not just a task that one performs. And in time, when we say we're editors, most people will know what we mean.

*Emma Pearmain*

## Editorial

I recently overheard some word buffs complaining about the tendency for 'verbing' in the business world. The shortlist of 'favourites' included 'to action', 'to impact' and 'to leverage' but my own 'verbing' anecdote doesn't involve business jargon.

A few years back I was watching Ian Thorpe on television and a commentator was talking about the lactic acid build-up in swimmers during a race. Another commentator replied enthusiastically "yes, he'd really be lactating by now"!

No mean feat.

On a more serious note, this month's Book Worm includes an abridgment of a talk given to the NSW Society of Editors by Sue Butler, publisher of the Macquarie Dictionary. Many thanks to Sue for allowing us to include it.

*Rebecca Newman*

## Forthcoming meeting

### *May: 'Legal editing' and 'Editing hypotheticals'*

Our May meeting will feature guest speakers **Tatum Hands** and **Danielle Davies**, who work in a highly specialised field of editing.

Tatum, who holds a degree in law and a PhD in political science, runs a local consultancy specialising in forensic legal editing and inquiry-based report writing for government. She recently completed a lengthy inquiry into the recognition of Aboriginal customary laws for the Law Reform Commission of Western Australia and is currently commissioned to review aspects of the law of homicide in this state.

Danielle holds degrees in law and English and is a practising criminal lawyer who also works as a writer and editor. She is the Western Australian editorial coordinator of a respected national law journal, with responsibility for commissioning and editing articles by academics, judges and lawyers.

Tatum and Danielle run writing and proofreading courses to assist courts and government agencies to improve the quality of their published documents, and

presently are engaged to develop a style guide to govern the production and publication of judgments of Western Australian courts.

After Tatum and Danielle's presentation, we will begin the first of our '**editing hypotheticals**' – scenarios to stimulate discussion on the kinds of editing issues that might feature in future accreditation examinations.

**Date:** Tuesday 1 May 2007

**Time:** 7.30 pm

**Venue:** CWA House, Board Room (3rd Floor)

1174 Hay Street, West Perth

Parking at rear of building; enter via door from car park

**Cost:** \$2 members, \$5 non-members

**RSVP:** Emma Pearmain, 9243 5045, <[emma007@amnet.net.au](mailto:emma007@amnet.net.au)>

## Report on April meeting

### *Editing Sex*

*Throbbing earthquakes and moist yearnings ... or should that be throbbing yearnings and moist earthquakes?*

*A discussion on editing sex*

Not being a member of the Country Women's Association, I can't say for sure what goes on at their AGM, but I'm guessing our last meeting was probably a rare type of discussion for their boardroom.

As Amanda (and by extension her friend, who kindly donated some examples to get the ball rolling) showed us, no matter how tacky, awful or cringe-inducing a sex scene in a book may be, it was probably worse when the editor first read it. Time and time again, a writer's ability to write decreases in direct proportion to the layers of clothes shed by the characters, until by the time they're naked the writers are relying on things throbbing (usually 'manhoods') or aching. From there, it's a slippery (no pun intended) slope to waves crashing and fireworks exploding, and then the only place left really is a Benny Hill skit.

Sadly, it's not just self-publishing or emerging authors who fall prey to this phenomenon; the Literary Review's Bad Sex in Fiction Awards has some that will be hard to get out of your head – gribbly nipples, anyone? – from some surprising sources (you can see for yourself at <http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/badsexpassages.html>).

I couldn't resist mentioning a book I worked on a few years back, which has become my unofficial standard against which I judge all the others. This self-published book not only involved an Australian Police Officer being recruited by MI5 to go to Russia to infiltrate the mafia by posing as a diamond merchant (in

order to foil their plan to flood the world with counterfeit notes from their stolen nuclear submarine, no less), but sex scenes so gratuitous and cheesy they made the plot sound reasonable.

Of course, some works rely on sexual content (or at least a whiff of it – pardon the pun again) to exist. Erotic fiction, Romance novels and even Slash fiction all carry clearly defined rules and notions about what can and can't be portrayed, and the brief examples from the floor were enough to prove that we as editors need to be aware of a genre's conventions before we start with our red pens.

Interestingly, most members agreed that they would have more of a problem dealing with gratuitous or excessively violent content than with passages of a sexual nature (spare a thought for Amanda's friend who had gratuitously violent sexual scenes to contend with).

Finally, the general consensus seemed to be that while the sexual content may offend our sense of literary merit and make us blush, violence reaches our ethical and moral core.

And that no one really knows what 'gribbly' means, but it sounds a little painful.

*Emma Pearmain*

## **New members**

Welcome to:

Polly Delany

Maureen de la Harpe

Mabel Kaplan

Piers Kelly

Judith Lamb

Simone Lazaroo

Carla Morris

Josephine Smith

## **Interested in furthering your skills in Word or InDesign?**

The SOEWA committee would like to gauge members' interest in workshops on software related to editing.

In 2004, the Australian Publishers Association brought to Western Australia a two-day workshop ('Onscreen Editing for Publication') on the use of Microsoft Word in editing documents, and several SOEWA members attended. The Victorian Society of Editors recently ran a training course for its members entitled 'Introduction to InDesign for Editors', aimed at building editors' understanding of this software, which is the publishing industry standard for desktop publishing. Knowing the parameters of InDesign enables editors to talk to designers in their own language, and to turn their hand to its basic operations as the necessity arises.

If the idea appeals to members, we will investigate either bringing an existing course to Perth or developing one here.

Would a workshop in Word and/or InDesign interest you? If so, please contact Emma Pearmain, <[emma007@amnet.net.au](mailto:emma007@amnet.net.au)>, or talk to a committee member. We would also like to hear from anyone who could teach such a course.

## Dictionaries and language communities

The following article is an abridgement of a talk given to the NSW society of editors by Sue Butler, publisher of the Macquarie Dictionary. The full version of the talk appeared in *Blue Pencil* in January/February 2007.

Her contention that 'the dictionary's primary aim is to be the record of the language of a particular community' was illustrated with some entries from Nathan Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* of 1727, finishing on his example of animal sacrifice.

... 'I won't go on,' Sue said, 'but Nathan did. "Burning the dead" is a good entry too. The language captured in the dictionary reflects the culture.

[She continued:] In the same way the various dictionaries today paint pictures of different communities within the umbrella of a shared English. And so the Oxford English Dictionary tells us about British English. Random House and Webster tell us about American English. Macquarie tells us about Australian English.

Compare the treatment of 'bush', a significant word in Australian English, given in an Australian, an English and an American dictionary.

We have yet to see dictionaries of other varieties of English, such as Singaporean and Malaysian English, or Philippine English, or Indian English, but they will come, and they will reflect different cultural concerns.

Their dictionaries will have productive items (like the word 'bush' in Australian English), which will produce sets of words not found in dictionaries of other varieties of English.

Authenticity in a variety of English is assessed on accent, lexicon and usage. We are finely attuned in both listening and reading to all the minutiae of these features and we know, even without being able to analyse in detail why we know, when our own variety is captured accurately and when it is not. In this process the dictionary that records a particular variety acts as the writer's friend. It gives writers the freedom to choose the words that are right for them and true to their place and time. The writer can set high store on authenticity without being afraid of losing intelligibility.

To show you how this works I thought I would look at a few examples – one from a writer in Singaporean English who is not supported by a dictionary, and one from a writer in American English who is.

Simon Tay, author of *Stand Alone* (1991) is a Singaporean poet and writer who has struggled with the need to break from the British English tradition in which he was taught in order to express himself authentically as a Singaporean. He finds that he is up against anxious editors who argue that in doing so he loses international intelligibility (*Words in a Cultural Context*, 1992).

For example, he fought with the editor of his short story over the use of the word 'horn'. In Singapore this is a verb as well as a noun, as in 'I horned them loud and long' (rather than 'I blared my horn loud and long'). Tay reacts badly to being told that he can't write the way he speaks as a Singaporean. This is but one item in a wide range that gives Singaporean English its distinctive flavour. Some of these items are now listed in the *Macquarie Dictionary*, indicating that dictionary's interest in the Englishes of our near neighbours.

Compare Simon Tay with all his difficulties with author Annie Proulx writing *The Shipping News* (1993). This book is full of dialect of Nova Scotia – words like crenshaw, watch cap, reel footing, sunkers and tickle.

Does Annie Proulx have any problem with international intelligibility? Not in the least, because the dialect she writes in is well covered in American dictionaries. Most of the time readers wouldn't bother to look things up – the flow of the writing carries them along, but if they did want to stop and take the trouble to find out exactly what a crenshaw is, they could.

The American regionalisms are just as obscure to the international market as the Singaporeanisms, but the existence of the dictionary on the one hand resolves the problem whereas the absence of the dictionary on the other gives rise to it.

The author of a Singaporean, Malaysian or Philippine novel has a much tougher battle. The fault lies not in the regional variety but in the dictionaries whose function in life is to record varieties of English – so that we can understand the subtleties of each other's language, the inevitable subtleties that arise from a particular community living in a particular place and having a shared culture and history as a common reference. For functional communication we can retreat to common ground but for an expression of what is most dynamic, most central and most local in a particular culture we must use the full resources of each variety.

The author of the *Shipping News* probably had little to fear from an editor or publisher in that there is a general tendency to accept American English and all its regionalisms.

Some writers use localism very sparingly – perhaps confining it to dialogue. Others wallow in it.

A writer like Les Murray need never fear that *Fredy Neptune* (1998) will not be understood while the *Macquarie* has entries for items such as 'shirty', meaning cross, and the plural form of you. Sometimes the dictionary has to scramble to keep up. I was astonished to find we didn't have 'to look sideways at someone' – a very difficult phrase to define – which appeared in *Fredy Neptune*.

But a writer using Malaysian English, such as Malike Shahnnon Ahmad in *No Harvest But A Thorn* (1991), has obviously gone beyond the bonds that a nervous editor will tolerate. The publisher's solution here is the footnote at the bottom of the page. 'Menerong' (menderong) is footnoted, unlike 'parang', 'rice barn' and 'areca nut', because it is not in any dictionary. In the case of 'fish trap', more commonly called a 'kedai' in Malaysian English, the solution is translation.

Jessica Hagedorn, Philippine writer, and author of *Dogeaters* (1990), has written confidently in Philippine English and seems to have got away with it. Although again there is no dictionary yet that will back her up.

This is the kind of lexicon we need to expect from writers in Malaysia, Philippines and Hong Kong.

The problem for all these writers is the one described by Chris Wallace-Crabbe (*Melbourne or the Bush*, 1974) in relation to Australian English – that authority does not come easily when we are escaping a colonial past.

The accuracy with which our language reflects our culture is the achievement of the writers within the language community. In creating texts they are, as Simon Tay said, bending and reshaping the language so that it is capable of authentic expression of our culture. This is not the work of just one writer, although individuals can have more or less influence on the process, but it is the collective triumph of those who give voice to the perceptions and imaginings within which we all share and shape our lives.

*Sue Butler* is a former president of Society of Editors (NSW) and was publisher of the second, third, and fourth editions of *The Macquarie Dictionary*.

For more details about the revised *Macquarie Dictionary Online* visit [www.macquariedictionary.com.au](http://www.macquariedictionary.com.au).

**Deadline for June 2007 Book Worm issue:**

**Tuesday 22 May 2007**

*All submissions gratefully accepted.*

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