



# BOOKWORM

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY OF EDITORS (WA) INC.

June 2007

## From the Chair

I don't mean to alarm anyone, but the world is not always as straightforward as it seems. Some of you may already know this stuff, but for those who don't:

Bigfoot is real, and possibly immortal.

Once, Miami Air Control lost contact with a plane over the Bermuda Triangle for ten minutes, and then the plane appeared on the screen again. It landed safely, but when the passengers got off, they discovered that every one's watch was ten minutes slow.

The stuff inside a golf ball is so toxic that when they need to get rid of the rats in the sewers, the government asks everyone to crack them and flush them down the toilet.

The FBI, or CIA, or maybe both, track every library book you get out, and if you get certain ones out too many times, they'll come and get you.

And how do I know these things? Because my nine-year-old told me. And even though she told me once that a teacher was in a car accident so bad that his eyeballs blasted right out of his head, and that she had an invisible Chinese sister named Rubella, this time she's getting her information from a *book*. So it must be true, right?

I remember being about the same age and discovering the 'truth' in *Arthur C. Clarke's World of Strange Powers* (until my parents confiscated it when I got upset about possibly spontaneously combusting).

Our May meeting showed us that just because someone is a senior judge, or is paid a lot of money to write something down, it doesn't mean it should be taken unquestioned.

Every week, I work with authors who insist on sharks eating submarines and God speaking through their cats/certain flowers/scribbling on a piece of paper ...

Yet I'm still amazed at the authority we embed into the written word just for being *written*.

Sometimes, I see being an editor as a bit like being a referee. We make sure that both sides are fair to each other, and have a fighting chance. We make sure the authors are speaking properly so they'll be heard, and try to make sure what they're saying is worth listening to. I've learnt that they may be wrong, but if I've helped them be logical or consistent about it (and of course they're not hurting anyone), that holds value too.

So Elvis, if you're reading this, and thinking of writing about Bigfoot, give me a call.

*Emma Pearmain*

### **Editor's note**

This month we include a report that appeared in the April 2007 *Newsletter* of the Society of Editors (Victoria) Inc. How can editors achieve better pay and conditions? L Elaine Miller and Rebecca Chau address the question.

*Rebecca Newman*

### **Forthcoming meeting**

#### ***June: How good an editor are you?***

Is there anything wrong with this statement?

"The Black Rock Stakes is an unusual relay race run in the Pilbara, where 100 kg of iron ore is pushed along by one person at a time in a wheelbarrow."

Tom Jenkins, who has edited many books for self-publishing authors, will challenge you on June 5 with this and more than 30 other extracts culled from texts he has edited (and a few from other places). They are the results of false logic, absence of commonsense, simple ignorance, spelling blunders and – above all – failure to check. Are you up to spotting and correcting them?

Question sheets will be provided, answers explored and some intriguing aspects of editing practice discussed. Come along and accept the challenge!

**Date:** Tuesday 5 June 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>

## Report on May meeting

### *Forensic Editing: the pen (or keyboard) really is mightier than the sword.*

A few meetings ago, two of our members mentioned in passing that they were 'forensic editors', and while the conversation moved on, the title lingered for some of your committee. Just what *is* a forensic editor, we wondered.

Despite what CSI would have you believe, 'forensic' doesn't mean doing everything by torchlight. Forensic editing simply means applying investigative editing and legal analytical skills to documents relating to, or used in, courts or forming part of public legal record.

Tatum Hands and Danielle Davies specialise in forensic and legal editing, and as they explained to our May meeting's audience, technological advances have made their role a necessary step in our legal and governmental systems.

The rise in desktop publishing has led to an accelerated publishing schedule for all types of documents. Traditionally, documents would have to pass through several stages, from writing to typing to printing to delivery, passing through the hands, and under the watchful eyes, of several specialists along the way. In comparison, today anything can go from conception to global distribution in a matter of hours.

In addition, there is an implicit assumption that highly qualified fields such as the law are practised by people who can write well; we assume that because someone holds an influential role, they must be able to articulate their knowledge in a logical, well thought out manner. However, contemporary legal studies do not prepare lawyers and judges for extensive writing tasks in an area where even the smallest punctuation or grammatical error can sometimes change the meaning of a whole piece and undermine the legal authority of the document.

This means that forensic editing is arguably one of the most responsibility-laden fields of editing. There is a need to hold a substantial amount of English and editorial skills alongside legal knowledge, as well as a clear prerogative to maintain the intentions and integrity of all documents.

Sound exhausting? When you take into account the rates charged by professional consultants, it's surprising to learn that forensic editors have got to keep a sharp eye out for plagiarism too. Every reference and footnote needs to be checked and checked again, as there have been messy instances where up to 60% of a document has been 'borrowed' from somewhere else ... and alarmingly, some writers didn't even know that this was an issue!

But then there is a silver lining. A collective sigh of wistful envy rose from the audience as Tatum explained about a contractual clause that explicitly expresses her right to be 'intrusive'. Yes, she has the contractual right to be as ruthless with her red pen as she wants to be.

*Specialised Legal Text Services is interested in hearing from any editors with legal experience who may be interested in working with them. For more information, please contact your committee, who will put you in touch with Tatum.*

**Emma Pearmain**

## **Practical ideas for positive change: your work, the union, and you**

*[Thank you to Katya Johanson for permission to reprint her report.]*

*The topic for the April meeting [Society of Editors, Victoria Inc.] was how editors can achieve better pay and conditions, and the answer suggested by L Elaine Miller and Rebecca Chau was that collective thinking and collective action provide the key.*

Elaine Miller, an independent editor with Otmar Miller Consultancy Pty Ltd, has also worked as an industrial organiser and maintains an active role as a member of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance. Her part of the evening focused primarily on freelance editors. Rebecca Chau, a commissioning editor at Lonely Planet, is an MEAA member and a member of Lonely Planet's house committee. She explained how in-house editors can negotiate an agreement with management, to provide benefits and protections lacking in individual contracts.

Addressing the question of whether editors are badly paid, Elaine's answer was both no and yes. In November 2005, Pam Hewitt's survey identified a national average pay rate for freelance editors of \$61 per hour and an even higher rate for Victorian editors of \$67 per hour

([http://www.emendediting.com/blog/2005\\_11\\_01\\_archive.html](http://www.emendediting.com/blog/2005_11_01_archive.html)), 5 November 2005). If an editor were to work 37 hours a week for 48 weeks a year at this average rate, his or her annual income would be \$81 760.32 after tax. Yet not only do few freelance editors manage (or choose) to work that many billable hours in a year, we know anecdotally that editors' income does not compare favourably with earnings in similar occupations, such as newspaper subediting. We also know that while some well-paid editors are pulling the average rate up, many experienced editors charge less than \$61 an hour and some charge as little as \$45.

So why are editors paid badly? We know it's not because their work is undervalued, nor can we say that it's solely greed on the part of publishers as employers, although editors working for government and corporate clients tend to be paid higher rates than those working for book publishers. Rather, there is a perception that the labour market for editors will not bear the higher rates charged in other industries. Some editors report a reluctance to raise their rates because they believe they won't get work — because their clients will be offering the work to someone who will agree to a lower fee.

This puts the onus back on editors to charge fees in line with the value of their work. Editors can get higher fees, particularly if they have specialised skills and knowledge, negotiate in a professional way and are not alone in charging that higher fee. So the first step to getting a higher rate is to talk to other editors.

What should you consider when deciding a fee? The number of hours you put into a job should be only one consideration, especially as most editors work faster as they become more experienced. Elaine recommended that editors insist on a comprehensive brief and that they supply a contract and an itemised quote. If you are not given a brief in writing, it's wise to seek a thorough briefing by asking a lot of questions so that you are fully aware of the work expected, and to ensure that the client doesn't add tasks that will extend the scope of the job, as they arise or are thought of post-quote. A contract ensures a mutual understanding of what the job requires, and a written one is easier to enforce than a verbal one. Your quote can be a contract if it says at the bottom, 'Written approval of this quote is required in order for work to commence on the project. Please fax or e-mail at your earliest convenience.'

Other factors should also influence your fee. A difficult deadline may require you to work on the weekends, when you wouldn't otherwise have chosen to do so, so add a surcharge. Take into account your start-up costs and overheads, the superannuation you will need and when you'll start needing it, and the cost of further training. Consider also the effect of inflation on your real salary and adjust your fees to match the Consumer Price Index. For 2007, for instance, this would have meant a rise in fees of 4 per cent to take into account the CPI rise for 2006.

The importance of discussing fees with colleagues cannot be overstated. Freelance editors often feel that they work in isolation, and unquestioningly accept what clients offer them on the assumption that that's the 'market rate', knowing little about what other editors are charging. Negotiating power comes from setting your own fee based on your understanding of the work involved, and knowing that other experienced editors will not undercut you. This is the basis of collective action, whether informally or as a member of a union.

While there is a perception that the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance could be better at representing editors, the incentive for it to do so will only come from increased membership of editors. A union is as strong as its members. Elaine's discussion then turned to in-house editors, whose job-related interests are as much about other workplace conditions as they are about pay. Many Australian publishing companies are parties to the Journalists (Book Industry) Award, although the 2006 amendments to the federal Workplace Relations Act 1996 (WorkChoices) drastically reduced the 'allowable matters' – or the conditions that awards can cover – and prevents new awards being introduced. Beyond the award, there are two basic kinds of agreement that in-house editors might have: an individual contract (such as an Australian Workplace Agreement) or a collective agreement outlining conditions for all employees (such as an Enterprise Agreement). Most publishers have their employees on individual contracts, but collective agreements are a better way to guarantee pay and conditions and to transparently extend the same conditions to all employees.

Rebecca Chau discussed the inadequacy of the award in protecting conditions for editors and her experience negotiating an Enterprise Agreement. The award guarantees about \$17 per hour for an editorial assistant and \$21 per hour for a

senior or managing editor, and these rates will not be periodically raised as they were in the past by the Industrial Relations Commission, as the Commission's powers were reduced by WorkChoices.

An Enterprise Agreement (EA) is negotiated collectively on behalf of all employees by the union, staff representing the union, or just staff representatives. All staff then vote for or against the newly negotiated agreement. An EA's life usually runs for only two or three years and is renegotiated when it expires.

Rebecca has twice been heavily involved in negotiating the EA at Lonely Planet. When it is to be renegotiated, the staff or union representatives compile a 'log of claims', which states the conditions the union and staff consider fair and reasonable. While the management at Lonely Planet negotiated hard in the last two negotiations, they were respectful of the log of claims and its significance. Lonely Planet's commitment to continue collective bargaining and the fact that the company employs a large proportion of union members were both significant factors in the union's success in achieving several important conditions, including not only pay conditions but also long service leave, maternity leave, study leave and redundancy pay-outs.

An EA is preferable to an individual contract because you can get a better deal if you negotiate collectively – you've got people studying your agreement in detail, seeking expert advice from the union and lawyers, and negotiating every single condition in your agreement on your behalf. As an employee, all you have to do, then, is decide whether the newly negotiated agreement is acceptable, and vote accordingly.

If an Enterprise Agreement is not an option, or if you are placed on an AWA, Rebecca emphasised that it is important to understand how you should best negotiate your pay and conditions. Even if you are negotiating an individual contract, you are legally entitled to have a person in the negotiations help you or represent you. And if you are a union member, a union representative can be there to help you.

In summary, the most effective ways for an in-house editor to improve their pay and conditions in negotiating an individual contract are to:

- Understand the market rates – that is, know what an editor with your level of experience, and with your specific type of experience (e.g. educational, academic, or travel books) is worth to another employer. As with freelance editors, it's a good idea to talk to other editors. Remember that market rates are still low.
- Consider what other conditions are important to you – perhaps parental leave provisions, flexible hours, carer's leave, study leave – as these could be points of negotiation.
- Learn about the negotiation process – negotiating is not trouble-making or generating animosity but simply a way to establish that you're being paid fairly.
- Seek advice – from the union, and from other employees.

## For freelance editors

### *Reasons not to undercharge*

- **Practicalities:** To break even, income must cover the start-up costs and overheads of your business.
- **More practicalities:** If inflation is 3%, and CPI is 3-4% per year, income must keep up with increases in the cost of living.
- **Pride in your own work:** Fair remuneration for careful, thorough work, and the expertise and experience that you bring to it, is a concrete sign of its value.
- **Pride in the profession:** Working as an editor is a practical and worthwhile way to earn a living. Rates that are considerably **lower than those of many other workers**, both tradespersons and professionals, sends the message that our skills are not as specialised, we're not as highly trained, or the job is not particularly important.
- The vast majority of editors are **women**. Charging low fees suggests that work done by women does not need to be paid highly.
- Not everyone 'needs' a lot of money, but charging low fees both does a disservice to our reputation as professionals and has significant consequences for **those who do need the money**.
- **It is taking a risk to charge more, but only if others are charging less.** 'What the market will bear' means only what the buyer is willing to pay for a service, and they will pay services needed if all suppliers are charging similar fees. A few who continue to charge less make it difficult for everyone else to raise theirs.

**Deadline for July 2007 *Bookworm* issue:**

**Tuesday 19 June 2007**

*All submissions gratefully accepted.*

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