



BOOKWORM

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY OF EDITORS (WA) INC.

August 2007

Editorial

We are a household of avid readers and occasionally we hear our children using phrases they have borrowed from the books we've read to them. Last week my 5-year-old daughter was rummaging in a drawer and making quite a mess. When I asked what she was doing (in my sweet fashion) she replied: 'Just fossicking in this drawer. I'm looking for my runcible pencil.' She meant the pencil that has been sharpened at both ends and I was delighted. That pencil is now referred to by all of us as the runcible pencil. (Never fear Lear-o-philes, she knows that 'runcible' is a nonsense word!)

It transpired that the runcible pencil was needed for a drawing of my son and daughter reading. I think the Newmans can claim we're doing our bit to foster another generation of readers – which bodes well for the future of those involved in the business of words!

Rebecca Newman

August meeting

There is no meeting in August. SOEWA will resume in September with a session about accreditation.

New members

Welcome to:

Robert McGlynn

David Carter

Vicki Portoes

Adrian Doesburg

How good an editor are you?

I was double-booked for Tom's session, and I'm very sorry I missed it, because his quiz consisted mainly of items that I was told not long ago, in no uncertain terms, were definitely and definitively not the province of editors.

When Janet MacKenzie came to Perth two or three years ago to talk to SOEWA about accreditation, I raised the issue of fact checking. I was the only editor in the room who thought that that was part of an editor's job. Most people in the room angrily rejected my suggestion that this was part of the editor's job. Janet MacKenzie was the fiercest opponent of my suggestion. She seemed to be personally affronted by the suggestion that an editor should do such menial work.

The general opinion of that meeting appeared to be that only questions 2, 15, 17, 19, 21, 22, 26, 28, 30, 31, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39 and 40 (that is, less than half of the problems) are part of an editor's responsibility. Everything else is the job of the author, and no one else.

By the way, the newspaper is called *The West Australian*, but the style guides recommended by almost all Australian publishers insist on 'the *West Australian*', 'the *Age*', 'the *Times*', etc. I personally think it's ludicrous, but that's what publishers insist on.

How good an editor am I? An unemployed one, at the moment. Hmmm.

Mar Bucknell

Double fault

On the ABC website, someone called Quentin Hull was reporting on the Wimbledon tennis tournament. English player Tim Henman lost again – and so does Quentin for this double fault in one sentence:

"It is times like this – and there have been plenty of them over the past decade – where Henman has transformed Pimm's and strawberries from genteel accoutrements to party-time supplies."

The makers of the Pimm's No. 1 cocktail and all who know the difference between non-Jewish and "genteel" can only mourn the passing of language, as well as good tennis players, in the Old Dart.

For the record, Pimm's was invented in 1823 and is also drunk at Royal Ascot and the Henley Regatta. You can make a fair copy of the stuff by mixing one measure of gin with one orange curaçao and one red vermouth. But don't drink it while you're editing; it is 25 per cent alcohol.

Tom Jenkins

IPed Notes

News from the Institute of Professional Editors July 2007

The beginning of July is the deadline for various activities of the Interim Council and its offshoots. If everyone keeps to their promises, by the time you read this not only will the website be transformed, but it will also contain several new items for you to think about.

The Communication Working Group and the Website Working Group are collaborating to finalise the revision of the website. The new version will incorporate several new functions and will be much more appealing and easier to use. We hope it will be the channel for communication between IPed and the members of the societies of editors, as well as presenting a professional image to the general public.

Following the members' overwhelming endorsement of the proposal to establish IPed as a company limited by guarantee, the Interim Council expects to have a draft of the constitution available for comment. Members will then have one month to send their comments on the draft to their IPed delegate, and the Interim Council will consider the feedback and make any necessary revisions by the end of August. Work is proceeding on a business plan and an indicative budget for the newly incorporated entity.

The Accreditation Board is considering the reaction to its presentation of a sample editing examination at the national conference in Hobart in May. Many participants were concerned at the prospect of a handwritten exam and expressed a strong preference for doing it on-screen. The Accreditation Board has prepared an issues paper to explore all the ramifications of moving to an on-screen exam, including an estimate of the extra costs of providing computers and technical assistance. The issues paper will be posted on the IPed website, and members are encouraged to study it and respond via their Accreditation Board delegate. The Accreditation Board is also collecting information about intentions to sit the exam; so far it seems that most members want to take the first opportunity and hope to sit in 2008.

Meanwhile the Assessors Forum is working on the marking system for the sample editing examination that was presented at the national conference, and both the exam and the answers will be posted on the website. Members are invited to work through the sample exam in their own time. During the second half of the year each society of editors will hold a workshop so members can discuss their impressions of the exam and raise their concerns. The recommendations from these workshops will be taken into account in preparing the actual examination, which is expected to be held in March 2008.

Janet Mackenzie

IPed Liaison Officer <<http://www.iped-editors.org>>

Reading the silences between words

[The following article appeared in the June 2007 edition of *Blue Pencil* – the newsletter of The Society of Editors (NSW) Inc. We thank Mark MacLeod for permission to reprint it here.]

The dynamic Mark MacLeod addressed the subject of children's publishing in Australia at our February meeting. Drawing on his many years of experience as a publisher, Mark offered valuable advice for aspiring children's book editors. He also intrigued the audience with his insights into the role of silence in communication within a child's world and the importance of understanding it.

It is good to be able to encourage potential children's book editors once again, because for a while there editing children's books didn't look like a wise career move. But it seems that the plateau is over and even picture books have publishers smiling.

However, the news isn't all positive. Young adult literary fiction is still a major challenge and some publishers who are not willing to gamble on a Children's Book Council short listing – or are not interested in doing so – talk about refocusing on more profitable areas of the list. But it's an exciting time to talk to people in children's publishing and to consider whether you have the right qualifications to edit books for young people.

One of the most important qualifications you could have is an interest in the spaces and silences between words. This is true of all editors working with imaginative literature, but especially so of those working with children. Although Australian children are more confident about speaking up than they were when I was young – as is painfully evident on any train or bus before and after school – Australian speech still values the taciturn. You need to be able to read Australian silence.

There is a specific cultural context, but communication through silence is not restricted to Australian children, of course. Wherever children are marginalised, in some adult company for example, or where their language skills are still developing, silence can be coded speech. And considered more broadly still, silence is now more significant than ever, since contemporary urban society seems driven to fill each moment of the day with noise and sound.

So if silence doesn't interest you, move on.

Many adults believe that their best qualification for working with children's books is their own experience as children. If you share this view, you'll find that your childhood memories often put you at a surprising disadvantage.

Childhood is not a constant. Attitudes change with the culture, so we need to be aware in the editing process that some authors might be writing about values from their own childhoods that are no longer current.

One good qualification for editing would be some knowledge of the changing ways we have perceived the child in history. But simple observation will complicate your perception of childhood too. Some adults are children at sixty, while some children are old souls and appear to be middle-aged from very early on.

The most successful people in the production of children's books have what we used to call an 'inner child' palpably present. I won't name and embarrass the people in children's publishing who are big kids, but look around at the next writers' festival or book week. You'll see who they are at once and in my opinion they are the best. They may not win the most awards from the adult arbiters of good children's literature, but young readers know them – by their books.

The greatest strength of these publishers, editors, writers, illustrators, booksellers and others is that they can still enter into the emotional experience of what it is like to be a child. The novelist Lilith Norman once told me wisely that this is the one ability a writer for children cannot do without.

If you are writing or editing children's books and have forgotten what the street you lived in as an eight-year-old looked like, or what clothes children wore ten years ago, what music they listened to – then library and internet sources will help you out. But if you have forgotten what it feels like to lose your bus money and have to walk home, or what it feels like to wet your pants in kindergarten and have to be given dry ones in front of the whole class, sourcing that emotional experience will be difficult. And sometimes impossible.

As an editor you must be alive to the words children actually use in the times and places created by a story, but you must also be alive to the joys and distresses of those children.

Writers for teens and judges of books for teens are clearly aware of the distress in the lives of young fictional characters. But I often wonder if their own adult preoccupations prevent them from hearing the laughter as well.

We laugh when we stand back from our own experiences and see them from different perspectives. Even the painful experiences. One of my favourite bits of advice from the self-help decade was, 'If you are going to be able to laugh about it in three months' or three years' time, why not try laughing now?' We don't do it ourselves – and we don't encourage young readers to do it – often enough.

I blame the relentless use of the first person.

Those of you who went to school in the pre-postmodern era were probably taught that while the third person was the 'normal' storytelling mode, the first person could be used to make a story more immediate or more 'personal'. I wanted to hug Maryanne Fahey when she had her narrator buck the twentieth century convention and choose the third person for his autobiography in *I, Nigel Dorking*. I'm so tired of these past generations of first person narrators.

Self-centred teens who, like pre-schoolers, are at the centre of the universe – obsessive – take themselves so seriously, they think that every step of their journey from the bedroom to the bathroom must be described in riveting detail.

I think of Tom Keneally telling student writers early in his career that one of the hardest decisions in fiction was whether your character should go to the bathroom. And, if so, how did you actually get him or her there? I think also of Jennifer Paterson's response to those who criticised her for not washing her hands while she cooked on *Two Fat Ladies*. She said of course she washed her hands constantly in the kitchen, but did her critics stop to consider what fabulous television that would make?

If every act is described, each one loses some significance in fiction. And we long for silence.

The one interesting use of the first person is of course when the narrator is unreliable and becomes the story. But as a parent I have sometimes wondered about what this does to our attempts to teach children about the truth. Is the concept of truth irrelevant? When, from our politicians down, communication seems to be all a matter of 'spin', is there any point to talking about such absolutes? Are all storytellers – including our children – relating more or less beautiful lies?

These are not issues pursued only by those concerned with children's books – as the controversy surrounding writers like Norma Khouri and James Frey indicates. Ethical and moral questions are particularly important in children's publishing, however, because the buyers of the books are parents and educators. So if such questions seem quaintly old fashioned, again you might be in the wrong place.

We now live in a world in which the main reading done by children every day is on the internet. Anyone with access to the technology can post on the net, and this is both its greatest strength and weakness. Clearly, understanding the text has become a more complex business than ever. And in pursuit of accuracy – particularly of information – young people need to read more than ever before.

Generally at this point, what you get on the net is raw, unmediated data. There will be more frequent opportunities for editors on the net in the future – witness the way Wikipedia's co-founder has now moved on to found Citizendium, with stricter editorial controls. But because there are few editorial filters applied to what is posted, children need to read widely and critically in order to assess what they are reading.

Of course not all the filtering that adults may wish to apply to children's reading is to ensure the reliability of the text. Censorship of children's books is still prevalent enough to persuade the authors of *Brought to Book* (Dillon and Williams, 1993) that there is a need for a second edition. This first study of censorship in Australian school libraries identified 'censorship by stealth', which still occurs at many points in the production of children's books. Adults make choices in writing, illustrating, editing, designing, marketing, selling, buying, reviewing and recommending books that are intended for children. And while they make these

choices in what they consider the best interests of children, children themselves are rarely consulted about the criteria used.

One of the consequences has been the power of nostalgia in contemporary children's publishing – an attempt by adults to impose an innocence on childhood, which they would say they were restoring, but which they may never have experienced themselves in the first place. There are far too many cute books about children that are pretending to be for children.

I feel assaulted by adults who impose cuteness on children and their world and diminish childhood in doing so.

I feel assaulted by other less important features of writing for children at the moment: the tide of cultural imperialism that rolled over us with American technology and the American popular culture it brought in its wake. Some days I feel like giving up my desire to help preserve the Australian version of English; but most days I want to resist the Australian authors who have their characters 'go watch television', or 'holler' to their friends. I can't tell you how many manuscripts I have read that include this American synonym for 'shout'. And yet I have still never heard an Australian child or adult actually use the word in speech.

Similarly, every second Australian school story I read refers to the head teacher as 'Principal Smith'. I realise that journalists have begun to use the American style 'Prime Minister Howard', 'Minister Downer' and so on. But I am yet to encounter an Australian school where this style is common. The head teacher is 'the principal' or 'the principal, Ms Smith' or just 'Ms Smith'. 'Principal Smith' is being modelled directly on 'Principal Skinner' from the ubiquitous *The Simpsons*.

I ask myself, too, as an editor whether our fondness for American language has dulled our ironic Australian sense of humour. Outside New York and the Jewish community, Americans are not noted for their irony. Why else would we have added 'not' to the end of a sentence in the late 80s and 90s? 'Great party – not.' Traditionally Australians would simply have used intonation to indicate their true feelings when they went home disappointed, saying, 'Great party!'

And when did we change from putting ourselves last in the list and start saying 'me and Principal Smith had a talk'? Must be when I started to get old, because I want to make a moral judgment about it!

Perhaps you're thinking it's an easy life if an editor can work up energy over such small points. But, silenced on the margins of adult power, children spend so much of their time noticing tiny details. That thread hanging from the teacher's jumper, Mum's not-quite-matching socks. The little veil of silence drawn over some subject of conversation when the adults notice that the children are listening. The meaning of intonation when the child who is normally addressed as 'Jenny' is suddenly called 'Jennifer'. The significance of that vast empty space that John Brown sees in the double bed next to Rose, as she pines for the Midnight Cat. The unspoken exasperation of the mother who thought she was going to enjoy a

holiday at Sandy Beach, using baby Gerald himself like a stick of driftwood to write the baby's name in the sand.

Despite the frustrations of relatively low pay, minimal marketing budgets, the disappearing backlist, the dominance of Harry Potter, adults who think they know what children should read and so on, I wouldn't miss such moments of insight that are enjoyed by children's publishers and editors in the spaces and silences between words for anything.

Mark MacLeod is an editor, publisher, lecturer and radio and television presenter. A past president of the Children's Book Council of Australia, he now works as a freelance editor and speaker.

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All submissions gratefully accepted.

Contacting SOEWA

President: Emma Pearmain, <emma007@amnet.net.au>

Vice-President and new member contact: James Hansen <jehansen@westnet.com.au>

Treasurer: Linda Browning

Secretary: Jo Smith <josmith@wordsmithwa.com.au>

General committee members:

Anne Surma <a.surma@murdoch.edu.au>

Tanya Marwood <tanya.m@globaldial.com>

Amanda Curtin <acurtin@highway1.com.au>

Janet Blagg <janetblagg@gmail.com>

Polly Delany <pollyevans@iinet.net.au>

Carla Morris <carlamorris@ozemail.com.au>

Newsletter editor: Rebecca Newman <rebecca.m.newman@gmail.com>

Proofreader: Michèle Drouart <drouart@webace.com.au>

SOEWA Web Site: <http://www.editorswa.com/>