



# Bookworm

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY OF EDITORS (WA) INC.

June 2008

## Editor's letter

I am not always able to make it to the monthly meetings and it's encouraging to hear about the new social get-togethers being organised. I'm keen to get along to some of them as I realise how few members I know.

This has inspired me to include a new section in future issues of *Bookworm* called 'Spotlight on the editor'. This is your chance to be famous for a month! Send us up to 350 words about why you became an editor and what your current work involves. Do you have a 'worst job ever' story? Do you have a tip to share? You are also welcome to include contact details and a website address and generally blow your own trumpet!

If you don't have time to scrawl 350 words about yourself right now but you'd like your month of fame, just send me your name and email address and I'll contact you further down the track. (If you are a member of Editors WA but you're not actually an editor, we'd like to hear your story too. I'll change the section's title for that month!)

The first member to put up their hand may be rewarded with chocolate! Unless I eat it first ...

*Rebecca Newman* <[rebecca.m.newman@gmail.com](mailto:rebecca.m.newman@gmail.com)>

## Committee update

Welcome to our new Vice President, Wendy Bulgin and our new Secretary, Penny Springthorpe. And thank you to Polly Delany for agreeing to stay on as a general committee member. The list of committee members appears on the last page of *Bookworm*.

## Forthcoming meeting

### *June: Editing the suits*

**Date:** Tuesday 3 June 2008

**Time:** 7.30 pm

**Venue:** CWA House, Boardroom (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:** to <[emma007@amnet.net.au](mailto:emma007@amnet.net.au)>

As editors, we know that it's not just the message; it's how the message gets there too.

June's meeting will look at how Editors WA can encourage businesses to use editing skills and editors in their standard practice. We will discuss the issues and then move into developing strategies to increase awareness and the use of editing in various industries. No previous business planning experience is necessary, simply a desire to promote editing to the wider public. This should be a great meeting for freelancing editors who are looking for ways to attract clients, and for those members who are simply interested in seeing clear, concise writing more often.

## Report on May 2008 meeting

### *The ideal manuscript assessment*

Janet Blagg opened her inspiring talk on manuscript assessing (06 May 2008) with her most significant point in response to questions previously sent in.

The biggest problem of poor assessments is their latching on to detail of language and expression (e.g. use of passive voice, aspects of punctuation) when much larger problems and issues are yet to be sorted. A competent assessor will always **start at the broadest level in evaluating a manuscript** and will focus on **structure over copyediting** except in the extremely rare cases where a manuscript proves to be outstanding on a first appraisal.

There was also Amanda Curtin's question: 'Who is considered to be an authoritative manuscript assessor?' Amanda is often asked this, and understood the real question behind it to be: 'If I pay X to do a manuscript assessment, will it carry any weight with Penguin, Allen & Unwin, Text, Fremantle, UWAP, Random House, UQP, etc.? Is it worth the paper it's written on?'

Janet's first response was that not one of us assessors in Perth ('me included', says Janet) has much clout with publishers. Beyond that, she stressed that an assessor should **not** tell writers that their manuscripts are 'publishable'. While you can tell some clients that you consider their work *deserves to be published*, you should

always add that this has no bearing on whether it *will be*. Unrealistically positive reports and recommendations accompanying manuscripts sent to publishers can give an author expectations that very likely will not be realised. At Fremantle Press the attachment of an editor's report is often taken with a pinch of salt as it so rarely reflects the true possibilities of the manuscript.

Georgia Richter raised the matter of different categories of clients and reminded us that not all of them want their work to be published. They may be writing memoirs for their children or have some other motivation that does not relate to being published. Janet and Georgia agreed that either way, it comes down to making the writer's work the best it can possibly be. 'You need to ascertain whether commercial publishing is what the clients want,' said Janet, as 'the distinction is relevant to how you address the problems in the MS.'

The assessor's responsibility to the client was the next major point. Janet cited poet and author Liana Christensen's advice, to '**do no harm**' when carrying out an assessment. **We must take responsibility** for the writer's artistic consciousness particularly in literary works. We must **know our limitations**. Beware, for example, of assessing genres or subject areas you are not well acquainted with. If writers tell you they've written fantasy or science fiction, and this is not your area of expertise, you could advise them to send their work to a specialist like Stephen Dedman or someone else you know of who has experience with those genres.

So, if the recommendations we make as assessors are not a key to the door of publishing, then what *are* we about? We are there to help writers make their work better.

Publishers matter in that we need to know what they are looking for, what is commercially viable. This does not mean that old-fashioned language in a historical novel or lots of sex scenes to spice up a story will automatically boost sales. In fact, as Janet sometimes has to tell clients, if you can't do the sex well, leave it out!

Janet then went through a list of attributes of the good assessor:

1. An understanding of what publishers are looking for and what is 'commercially publishable'.
2. A background of very wide reading. 'If we've read long and widely, we can at least be objective (as the author's pals cannot be), and *can* see whether something has a chance of being published in today's world'. For those who didn't get the names of some of the top authors Janet mentioned in passing: Barbara Kingsolver (*The Poisonwood Bible*) and Marianne Wiggins (*Evidence of Things Unseen* and *Eveless Eden*).

3. Knowledge of the subject area. While this may seem irrelevant with some fiction and with memoirs, note Amanda Curtin's paper on 'getting it right in fiction'.<sup>1</sup>
4. Knowledge of the genre. This includes awareness of the writer's particular style, tone; it would be a mistake, for example, to standardise/formalise an easy-going speaking style that meets the requirements of the genre or that is consistent and clearly part of the writer's voice or approach to the content.
5. The imagination to know what will work in the market and what to do with pieces that don't quite work commercially. What was written as an adult novel might work (and sell) far better as a Young Adult novel. (In the case of writing not suited to the market, you may find the perfect niche for a manuscript among educational publishers, for instance.)
6. The ability to see the bigger picture, especially at the structural level, which should always come first. 'It's useless to talk of what's needed at the micro level if it's all going to be changed at the macro.'
7. A perception of the assessment as a 'review before the fact'. You might imagine how far a hostile reviewer might take a critique. This may help you to make suggestions of real benefit to the writer.
8. The ability to advise as a writing teacher or personal trainer would do. If tutoring in some aspect of creative writing is what's needed and you're not able to offer this, direct the author of the manuscript to the best place.

Citing one example of an assessment, Janet reminded us how agendas in fiction can affect readability. It is difficult to make an engaging novel out of an environmental agenda, for example. (Though not impossible, with humour.)

**It is good for an assessor to be strong and authoritative – but only if you really know what you're saying.** If you suggest a richer style, for example, you should be 'very confident that a dry and distanced style is not appropriate'. And you should have guidelines to offer. Strong writers will be able to use what advice you give ... 'but how do you know your suggestions are good?' If you *don't* know, then it's better simply to say so. It is important to know when a manuscript does not come within your assessment purview and to decline the work. You can always advise the writer to check the register or Internet.

Keep in mind that good writing does not necessarily mean a good manuscript. What if it does not do what it was intended for? An example would be a children's story that tries to impart scientific knowledge about the natural world. It may be well written and full of information, but may not engage as a story.

While there is a need for tact – it is important not to 'overwhelm the author with negativity', and we should find something positive to say early on that will help

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<sup>1</sup> Amanda Curtin presented this paper at the IPEd national conference in Hobart in May, 2007. The paper has been posted to the conference website: <[www.tas-editors.org.au/conference/curtin.html](http://www.tas-editors.org.au/conference/curtin.html)>.

to 'buoy the client against the bad news' – this should never be 'at the expense of truthfulness'. People are paying us for a true appraisal.

Summing up, Janet mentioned some of the worst pitfalls of assessments: giving an author only the benefit of micro-level editing; coupling unhelpful micro-level comments with general comments about 'publishability' that are incorrect; highly praising manuscripts so flawed that you can only 'mislead the authors into a false sense of their own talent'. Assessors sometimes hold back unwelcome feedback because they don't want to hurt, or to be disliked. Or perhaps they don't know how bad a manuscript is. 'If the latter,' said Janet, 'why are they doing manuscript reports?'

In the context of explaining the vagaries of publishing to hopeful authors, Janet referred to Bookscan, the link publishers have to every bookstore cash register so that sales are tracked. It is all about what will sell. Janet provides the following link to a good discussion on the Internet about the effects of Bookscan on Australian publishing.

<[www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/s1425012.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/s1425012.htm)>

Our highly engaging and informative speaker truly merited the bottle of wine and appreciative clapping that followed.

*Michèle Drouart*

IPEd Notes

*News from the Institute of Professional Editors*

*May 2008*

The inaugural meeting of the IPed Council, held in Canberra in mid-April, appointed Virginia Wilton of the Canberra society as Chair and Janice Bird of Tasmania as honorary Treasurer until the annual general meeting later in 2008. Following consideration of a duty statement for the paid part-time position of Secretary, Ed Highley, who has done a wonderful job as unpaid Secretary since 2005, was appointed temporarily; the position will be advertised before the annual general meeting.

Each councillor has taken responsibility for a particular area: budget, finance and risk management, Virginia Wilton, Ed Highley and Janice Bird; website, communication and PR, Rosemary Luke; professional development and standards, Anne Surma and Robin Bennett, who is also on the Accreditation Board; policy development, Rosemary Noble; dispute resolution and governance, Michael Lewis, who is also Council representative on the Accreditation Board. Councillors will prepare issues papers on their respective areas for discussion at their next meeting in Adelaide at the end of May.

Conscious of their responsibilities under the Corporations Law, the councillors devoted a lot of time to IPed's finances. They have set the annual levy for 2008-09 at \$20 per society member, and agreed on policy and procedures for the costs of meetings. The Council will obtain advice on budgeting, taxation (particularly

GST) and other financial matters from an accountant with experience in not-for-profit organisations, and seek appropriate suppliers of banking and insurance by the end of May.

The Council commended the Accreditation Board on its remarkable progress in developing the accreditation scheme, particularly in managing the intense activity since the end of 2007. Councillors, having studied the board's budget, were concerned at the likely significant shortfall between revenue and costs for the first exam. They have begun work on a rigorous, revised budget and a broader business model for accreditation so that the examination can be offered at an acceptable fee without jeopardising IPEd's overall objectives and operations. As a result, the Council has reluctantly decided to postpone the first exam until later in 2008. It maintains the commitment to provide members with four months' notice of the date of the exam.

The Accreditation Board and the Assessors Forum have continued to hold teleconferences to discuss preparations for the exam. The board has appointed a team of highly experienced editors to develop the exam paper, with Meryl Potter as lead writer and Janet Salisbury, Shelley Kenigsberg and Stephanie Holt as reviewers. Alan Ernst as exam coordinator will oversee the conduct of the exam. The first priority is to revise the sample exam and post it on the website so that candidates will know exactly what to expect.

*Janet Mackenzie*

IPEd Liaison Officer

**Codicil:**

Regretfully, these will be Janet's last *IPEd Notes*. At the Canberra meeting, the Council decided to share the Liaison Officer's tasks between the Secretary (who will write the column), a delegated Councillor and the Communication Committee. I would like, on behalf of the Council, to extend our heartfelt thanks to Janet for her tremendous contribution through her liaison role and in a multitude of other ways, in helping to get us to where we are today. I feel sure that members of all the societies that constitute our new institute will share this sentiment. Of course, we are not giving Janet her complete freedom; far from it. She is still working hard for the profession through her participation in the Assessors Forum, has agreed to assist in the Council's first strategic planning session and I have little doubt that other tasks to which she is eminently suited will arise in the future, though we may have to do a little bit of gentle leaning.

Just for the record, Janet's first *IPEd Notes* appeared (as *CASE Notes*) in November 2004, and began 'CASE is on the brink of a new phase in its existence...'. Too true, though the brink may have been a little more distant than we thought at the time.

*Virginia Wilton*

Chair, IPEd Council <[www.iped-editors.org](http://www.iped-editors.org)>

## New members

Welcome to these new members who joined Editors WA in 2008:

Elizabeth Albert  
Robin Barnes  
Ruth Bertenshaw  
Roger Bourke  
Clare Chamberlain  
Tanja Dusseldorp  
Carmel Forrest  
Claire Gaunt  
Janis Haswell  
Judith (Kate) Kenny  
David-Elijah Menashe  
Caroline Moran  
Emma Pope  
Ursula Shaw  
Catherine Sorokine  
Penny Springthorpe  
Janine Taylor

Many of these new members have already put their hands up for various roles including the membership on the committee, writing up the monthly meeting report and gleaning items of interest from the other societies' newsletters. Thanks for your good work!

## 4<sup>th</sup> IPED National Editors Conference: 8-10 October 2009

### *Getting the message across*

Information for conference delegates will be available on the conference website:  
<[www.editors-sa.org.au/conference09.html](http://www.editors-sa.org.au/conference09.html)>

Or on the IPED website:

<[www.iped-editors.org/content/conferences](http://www.iped-editors.org/content/conferences)>

Start planning your trip to Adelaide, where you can enjoy the fabulous architecture and culture as well as listen, discuss, learn, edit, eat and drink!

### 'Future of Publishing' survey now online

A major survey of publishers, authors and others within the Australian publishing industry is underway. Commissioned by the Australia Council and Copyright Agency Ltd and conducted by Bloom Partners, the survey will explore what steps publishers are taking to address the challenge of the digital future, and whether publishers see merit in working together – and if so, how.

Answer the survey questionnaire online at <[www.bloompartners.com.au](http://www.bloompartners.com.au)>. For further details, phone Steve Carey at Bloom Partners, (03) 9584 4990.

Deadline for July 2008 *Bookworm*:  
Tuesday 17 June 2008

Contacting Editors WA

**President:** Emma Pearmain <[emma007@amnet.net.au](mailto:emma007@amnet.net.au)>

**Vice-President:** Wendy Bulgin <[wendybulgin@iprimus.com.au](mailto:wendybulgin@iprimus.com.au)>

**Treasurer:** Carla Morris <[carlamorris@ozemail.com.au](mailto:carlamorris@ozemail.com.au)>

**Secretary:** Penny Springthorpe <[penny.springthorpe@westnet.com.au](mailto:penny.springthorpe@westnet.com.au)>

**General committee members:**

Tanja Dusseldorp (new member contact) <[tanja.dusseldorp@westnet.com.au](mailto:tanja.dusseldorp@westnet.com.au)>

Anne Surma <[a.surma@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:a.surma@murdoch.edu.au)>

Tanya Marwood <[tanya.m@globaldial.com](mailto:tanya.m@globaldial.com)>

Robin Bower <[robinb@westnet.com.au](mailto:robinb@westnet.com.au)>

Amanda Curtin <[acurtin@highway1.com.au](mailto:acurtin@highway1.com.au)>

Polly Delany <[pollyevans@inet.net.au](mailto:pollyevans@inet.net.au)>

Jo Smith <[josmith@wordsmithwa.com.au](mailto:josmith@wordsmithwa.com.au)>

**IPED delegate:** Anne Surma <[a.surma@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:a.surma@murdoch.edu.au)>

**IPED Accreditation Board delegate:** Amanda Curtin <[acurtin@highway1.com.au](mailto:acurtin@highway1.com.au)>

**Newsletter editor:** Rebecca Newman <[rebecca.m.newman@gmail.com](mailto:rebecca.m.newman@gmail.com)>

**Proofreader (this issue only):** Katie Lennerts <[prez\\_ups@yahoo.com.au](mailto:prez_ups@yahoo.com.au)>

**Editors WA Web Site:** <[www.editorswa.com](http://www.editorswa.com)>