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The Decline of the Literary Paradigm in Australian Publishing

reprinted from *Ten Years*, HEAT 12 n.s. (Giramondo, 2006)

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Bestseller lists are of fundamental symbolic importance to the publishing industry. They show not only what is selling, but how the industry sees itself. In their margins are written not only the tastes of readers, but the aspirations of publishers, the pretensions of authors, and the topography of the market. Until the late 1990s in Australia such lists were generally compiled by the literary editors of major daily newspapers and literary magazines, who contacted booksellers and asked what was selling. Such lists were notoriously filtered. Those contacted were most often independents in inner-city locations, close to universities. Genre fiction would routinely be omitted from their quick, usually anecdotal, assessment of what was moving in the shop, along with any non-fiction deemed lowbrow and unbecoming, such as *The Guinness Book of Records*, a perennial bestseller in almost all bookshops. Instead, such lists were comprised almost entirely of literary fiction and literary non-fiction.

A typical list of the time published in the March 1996 edition of *Australian Book Review* shows three separate lists based on information supplied by three different independent booksellers in three state capitals – Melbourne, Adelaide and Hobart. Limited to Australian-

published titles, all three lists are dominated by an established canon of local literary writers such as Amanda Lohrey, David Foster, Catherine Ford and Tim Winton, mixed with then-newcomers such as Sue Woolfe and Linda Jaivin. Among these are scattered 'serious' non-fiction titles by established writers such as Tim Flannery, Drusilla Modjeska, Eva Cox and Christopher Koch, on topics such as journalism, politics, psychotherapy, environmentalism and the future of civil society. Bryce Courtenay, Australia's best-selling author, is the only truly popular novelist included. There are no self-help books, cook-books, get-rich-quick titles, or sporting biographies.

In December 2000 this situation began to change with the establishment of Nielsen BookScan, a local affiliate of US polling company A.C. Nielsen. Nielsen tracks book sales by barcode from around eighty-five per cent of all retail outlets selling books in Australia. Its main customers are publishing houses which, for an annual subscription fee of up to \$100,000, are regularly emailed spreadsheets showing the best-selling books.¹ These include details such as actual copies sold, average selling price and publisher across 140 genre categories and sub-categories. For a much smaller weekly fee (\$50) newspapers and other journals can subscribe to an abbreviated version of the main list that shows the top ten titles in any category. While some newspapers still prefer to generate their own lists, BookScan figures have become the publishing industry's main source of sales information, and give a quite different picture of the market. Of the top 132 best-selling titles listed in the first two pages of the Nielsen top 5000 list for the five weeks ending 1 January 2005, for example, 65 originate from Australia. Of these only four are Australian-published literary novels: Tim Winton's *The Turning* at number 9, *Cloudstreet* at number 65, and *Dirt Music* at number 104, and Gregory David Roberts's *Shantaram* at number 103. Winton is unique in Australian publishing, having both a literary and a large popular audience. The next literary novel is Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* in slot 612. Among the mostly non-fiction books that make up the top 132 titles there are only three Australian-published 'serious' highbrow non-fiction titles: Don Watson's *Watson's Dictionary of Weasel Words* at number 35 and his *Death Sentence* at number 114

(both bemoaning managerialist language in everyday speech). Helen Garner's *Joe Cinque's Consolation* (a new journalism-style account of a murder trial) comes in at number 74.

Popular fiction, almost completely absent from the *ABR* list, is prominent in the Nielsen list. Bryce Courtenay's *Brother Fish* was the second-highest selling title (Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* was first). Di Morrissey's *Reef* is at number 7. Matthew Reilly's *Hovercar Racer* is at number 32. Together they outsold the four literary fiction titles three-and-a-half times to one (191,441 against 57,159 copies) and earned two-and-a-half times their revenue (\$4,535,580 against \$1,763,059). Instead of reading 'serious' non-fiction, Australians appear to be reading (or buying) cookbooks, and books by and about cricketers. Donna Hay's *The Instant Cook* is at number 8, Stephanie Alexander's *Cook's Companion* at number 20, and *Marie Claire Kitchen* at 31. Books by or about cricketers fill slots 27 and 56 (Peter Fitzsimmons's *Steve Waugh and Remembering Hookesy*), 59 (Ricky Ponting and B. Murgatroyd's *A Captain's Diary*), and 118 (*Darren Lehmann: Worth the Wait*). Food and cricket come together in the *Matthew Hayden Cookbook* at number 61. These sit among popular war histories, celebrity memoirs, humour, self-help books and Australiana.

In the differences between the two lists can be read a series of significant structural changes that have taken place in the Australian book-publishing industry in the last decade. Since the mid-1990s the industry has globalised and consolidated to become an information-based business, beholden, in the case of nine out of ten of Australia's top companies, to global media giants. The industry has adopted, in this same period, modern marketing techniques and digital production techniques, and has been forced to reduce its reliance on government subsidies and other forms of protection at the same time as it has dramatically widened its retail base to include chain and discount department stores, and to focus increasingly on the export market.

Of the recent changes in Australian book publishing, among the most striking is the decline of the literary paradigm. In her memoir, *Other People's Words*, Hilary McPhee describes the Australian industry as it was in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, sparked by cultural nationalism, funded by progressive governments, the product of a nation shaking off

a malaise as publishers sought to break away from the British-dominated publishing of the postwar era. This, McPhee says, was a 'creative phase'; it led to the construction of a local canon of literary authors whose titles served as flagships for most local publishers' lists, strongly supported, after 1975, by the Australia Council, founded by the Whitlam Labor government to help fund the arts. The growing local publishing industry benefited from other forms of government support. Books were sales-tax free and a government-run Book Bounty system further subsidised titles printed in Australia, which, since most colour titles are printed in South-East Asia, effectively subsidised non-illustrated fiction and non-fiction titles. The literary paradigm that resulted was focused on the project of constructing a national literary canon, centred on leading writers of the Whitlam generation and those perceived to be their heirs. As recently as the late 1990s large advances were being paid to both established and first-time authors as publishers actively sought out literary fiction.

By the early 2000s almost no major Australian publisher was aggressively seeking or promoting new literary fiction at the forefront of their lists, and literary fiction was no longer the cornerstone of the industry's self-perception. In the late 1990s Penguin Books, which had been at the forefront of the 'cultural renaissance' of the 1960s to 80s period, first dropped its poetry list, and then culled its mid-list (that is, books with moderate print runs, often middlebrow fiction). Instead, Penguin decided to 'pick winners' by shifting emphasis to publishing mass market titles by high-profile popular authors such as Bryce Courtenay, who was reportedly signed up for a one million dollar-plus multi-book deal. Since 2003 HarperCollins, too, has gradually been divesting itself of its mid-list, and in 2004 published forty per cent fewer books, citing weak sales of literary fiction.² In 2004 Simon & Schuster announced it would no longer take on first-time authors. In the past decade entries in the Miles Franklin Award, Australia's premier literary prize, have dropped by a third.³ In the same period entries in an annual award for new novelists run by the *Sydney Morning Herald* have sunk from between fifteen and twenty-five titles per year, of which more than half were literary, to a total of eleven entries in 2005, of which four were literary. Large multinationals such as

Penguin submitted no entries, while Random House and Pan Macmillan submitted one each.⁴ In 1996, the year of the *ABR* list, Australia's multinational publishers and Allen & Unwin, the only comparably sized independent, published sixty literary novels between them. In 2004 those same publishers published thirty-two.⁵

Declining editing standards, changes in literary taste, the rise of marketing departments in publishing houses, changing leisure patterns, the advent of Nielsen BookScan itself: all have been blamed for Australian publishers' declining emphasis on literary fiction in a string of public lectures, essays, and newspaper and magazine articles by leading literary figures. Brian Castro has predicted the 'death of the novel' (again); James Ley, writing in *ABR*, has blamed waning interest on the declining complexity of literary fiction; and the *Sydney Morning Herald* literary editor Malcolm Knox has mourned the demise of the mid-list novel.⁶ There is an element of truth in some of these diagnoses, but the frame in which they are staged is too limited. Conceived in these narrow terms the decline of literary publishing appears as a local problem, when it is in fact a local effect of the global. The decline of the literary paradigm can be understood in terms of broader social and governmental shifts related to globalisation, such as the decline of postwar consensus ('welfare state') politics and their supplanting by a new consensus based around free-market notions of deregulation, privatisation and trade liberalisation, and the rise of the global information economy. Seen in these terms the decline of the literary paradigm isn't simply to do with literature; it's to do with a broader reconceptualisation of the public sphere itself.

In Australia the decline of the literary paradigm has tallied precisely with the end of a period of government interventionist nation-building, both in general terms and with respect to the book-publishing industry. Since the early 1980s successive governments have progressively 'opened up' the Australian economy to international competition, ending industry assistance schemes, eliminating remaining tariffs and encouraging exports, in the context of a wider climate of deregulation. The abandonment of fixed exchange rates in the early 1980s, changes to the copyright law to allow the parallel importation of books from the USA in 1991, and the axing by the Howard govern-

ment in 1996 of the Book Bounty had a disproportionate effect on literary titles since most illustrated titles were already printed offshore. In 2000 the federal government announced it would seek to abolish the thirty-day rule, which grants copyright protection to local titles published within thirty days of publication anywhere else in the world. This, when it happens, will remove the last barriers to parallel imports. The introduction of GST on all non-food retail products in 2000, costs of which were mostly absorbed by publishers (with a resulting profit slump), imposed, for the first time, a sales tax on books. Low levels of government funding for literature – \$29.7 million across all government funding bodies in 2002/03 – further eroded support.⁷ 2004 saw the end of the Enhanced Printing Industry Competitiveness Scheme which, together with the four-year Book Industry Assistance Plan, begun in 1999, pumped \$240 million into the industry. One effect of the 2004 Australia–US Free Trade Agreement (AUSFTA) will be to ‘harmonise’ copyright laws between Australia and the USA, which leading intellectual property lawyers argue will be to the benefit of the stronger trading partner.⁸ Clauses within the AUSFTA that commit both parties to the World Intellectual Property Organization Treaty (1996) are consistent with World Trade Organization objectives of removing local market protections to create a single global market for commercial media.⁹

This same trend to deregulation, enacted in world treaties such as the 1996 US Telecommunications Act, which underwrote the consolidation of US media corporations, has helped hasten a worldwide trend to monopolisation in the media industry. Six major companies – Bertelsmann, Time Warner, Viacom, News Limited, Disney and Vivendi – now control the majority of western media holdings, with a second tier of companies, such as Hachette Livre, Pearson and von Holtzbrinck, owning most of the rest. These holdings include nine out of the ten largest Australian publishing companies, the top four of which – HarperCollins (News Corporation), Penguin (the Pearson Group), Random House (Bertelsmann) and Pan Macmillan (von Holtzbrinck) – accounted for 36.9 per cent of sales in 2003. The potential effects of media consolidation on literary publishing are obvious. The primary fiduciary duty of globally owned publishing houses is to

their shareholders and (offshore) owners; such companies tend not to see themselves as custodians of national literary cultures. But the major concern of conglomerates that bought publishing properties as part of their consolidation strategies is the low profit margin of books. Compared to the fifteen per cent plus margins traditionally enjoyed by the other media holdings of such multinationals, book publishers typically earn less than ten per cent profit, in part because books, unlike all other forms of commercial media, do not carry paid advertising.

As they were absorbed into global media corporations publishers began to change their approach to risk management, searching for certainty in stable formulas. The decline of the literary paradigm has been occasioned by the acknowledgment that genre fiction has always been a strong but unacknowledged seller (as was recognised when music lists were democratised in the USA, revealing the hitherto hidden strength of the black, country and heavy metal markets). The appearance of genre fiction in bestseller lists with the advent of BookScan also granted it a new cultural and economic respectability. Genre fiction is highly author- and formula-driven and attracts reader loyalty, while its authors tend to generate new titles on a regular, often annual, basis, making genre fiction far more reliable than literary fiction from a publisher's list-building point of view. The authors of popular fiction are also more likely to be granted celebrity status than literary authors, maximising their promotional potential. Celebrity-driven titles offer a similar (albeit often illusory) sense of certainty; the decline of literary publishing has been mirrored by an increase in celebrity biographies (with mixed results – books by Dawn Fraser and Maggie Tabberer sold extremely well, while others by sports stars such as Cathy Freeman and Ian Thorpe did not, belying the high advances paid for them), and radio and television tie-in books intended to enhance the cross-platform convergence strategies of multinationals. Cookbooks by chefs with regular television gigs have become a staple of this strategy. Such titles, too, have the advantage of a high unit price, maximising profit (the photography costs are usually at least partly borne by the author).

The proliferation of books by cricketers is another instance of this same trend; such sportsmen have a strong presence in high-rating

telecasts of matches, in advertising, and in interviews, media profiles, and appearances on TV game shows and chat shows. Such strategies tie in with the personality-driven promotional strategies that publishers have adopted to create media events around books, rather than pay for advertising. In an effort to tie in books with the short profit cycles and 'story cycles' of other forms of media in global corporate holdings, such as magazines and television, books, including literary novels, are increasingly marketed in the same way as those media, especially magazines, and are given a short shelf-life of four to six weeks to establish themselves in the market. There has been a related shift in emphasis from backlist to frontlist titles, also driven by the rise of marketing strategies that emphasise branding and market saturation.¹⁰ In most conglomerate-owned publishing houses new titles are no longer commissioned and signed-off on by publishers acting in collaboration with other departments, but are run through a committee system. Strong publisher enthusiasm for a title – traditionally required to get literary fiction over the bar – is no longer a guide to whether it will be published.

The use of celebrities reflects, too, the increased emphasis on selling books to non-traditional retail outlets, such as discount and variety stores. Such outlets represent a 'third tier' of marketing outside chain bookstores and independents, and are not usually considered viable carriers of literary titles. For publishers they offer high levels of risk – most sales to them are large-discount firm sales – offset by volume and the opportunity to reach new readers. High discounts require large print runs to sustain profitability and, as US publishing industry commentator Albert Greco has argued, publishers have consequently shifted their focus from the quality of the product to increasing production efficiency and widening distribution. This has helped drive the shift in emphasis from editorial to marketing, and the consequent stagnation in editorial budgets and decline in standards.¹¹ By putting books where people already are, publishers also seek to bypass the gatekeepers of the newspaper review pages and the traditional booksellers' stock buyers. The willingness of many 'big box' retail outlets prominently to display multiple 'facings' (face-out retail displays) of dozens, sometimes even hundreds, of copies of lead titles, complements the

brand-building strategies of major publishers and generates an aura of popularity around key titles. If the pitch to customers is successful the strategy helps to get books into the Nielsen bestseller lists quickly (and therefore into the book pages by the back door), which generates further sales. The very fact of appearing on a bestseller list, according to industry sources, can in some cases double sales.¹² Penguin markets Bryce Courtenay's books very effectively this way, selling high volumes at high discounts to department stores.

In *The Rise of the Network Society* Manuel Castells has argued that:

[This new economy] is *informational* because the productivity and competitiveness of units or agents in this economy (be it regions, firms, or nations) fundamentally depend on their capacity to generate, process, and apply efficiently knowledge-based information. It is *global* because the core activities of production, consumption, and circulation, as well as their components (capital, labour, raw materials, management, information, technology, markets) are organized on a global scale, either directly or through a network of linkages between economic agents.¹³

Castells' account of an all-encompassing global network engendered by forces of technical 'breakthrough', 'transformation' and 'revolution' is open to critique as a totalising account that tends to technological determinism. Nevertheless it accurately describes the integration of publishers within a global information economy primarily oriented around trade between and within Europe, the USA and Japan.

Book publishing has become an information industry in so far as it has become a business oriented not so much on the manufacture of goods for sale, but on the generation of rights for sale, on the understanding that publishers are in the business of owning, trading and adding value to information. This shift to informationism has been facilitated by the same patterns of deregulation that have underpinned the consolidation of the global media industry. Such economic 'reforms' have not only lowered barriers to cross-ownership, but have seen the erosion of legislative borders between copyright territories and the rationalisation of copyright regimes to fit US law in particular (GATT 1994, NAFTA 1994, AUSFTA 2004). 'Information' here also

refers to the digitisation of book-publishing processes, from writing to editing, design and typesetting, to inventory control, ordering and the provision of title information to booksellers. These processes have cut costs by facilitating outsourcing (both to local freelancers and to 'low-wage' nations such as Malaysia and India), and rapidly sped up the production of books, helping it to conform to broader media cycles for the purposes of promotion and content tie-ins. 'Information' refers also to information about markets, demographics, individual customers and the success of existing properties, knowledge that becomes a key to strategising, marketing and so on.

Publishers were slow to adopt the information-based management principles popularised in the 1980s by management theorists such as Peter Drucker, who proposed that successful companies would be those that shifted away from command-control management models to bottom-up, research- and information-based models.¹⁴ In a culture where most companies relied on their closeness to producers to understand the market, and where it was cheaper to publish the title than research the market, information flows relied on educated guesses and mythologies that circulated around prestige authors. It was only with the availability of data from sources such as BookScan that publishers began to shift away from a top-down approach to managing culture to a bottom-up, consumer-driven understanding of the market.

Literature is at a further disadvantage in such an economy, since it is one of the less available genres for cross-platform granularisation, aggregation and transference within vertically integrated global media corporations. The availability of literary texts for Hollywood adaptation, which is the main form of cross-platform convergence available for literature, is a well-established licensing practice that is not markedly enhanced by the global consolidation of media ownership. Non-fiction titles, on the other hand, are readily available for granularisation, since their content is easily broken down into component parts suitable for magazine articles, web pages, newspaper features, television segments and so on, which in turn increasingly drive the production of non-fiction books. The content of cooking and lifestyle titles, for example, is easily broken down into other media, to become 'content' on a peg for news stories, magazine articles and websites, just

as the reverse also applies, with television segments and magazine articles being turned into books.

The availability of data from companies such as BookScan means that publishers, for the first time, have access to accurate, up-to-the-minute sales figures that are transparent across the industry. No longer is it possible for low-selling but prestigious literary authors to publisher-hop their way from one title to the next, fudging their sales figures. Accurate figures allow publishers to track sales figures not only book by book, but store by store, and to see what works in which markets, and the most lucrative areas to publish in. The resulting segmentation of lists means that low-volume but ‘culturally significant’ market segments are no longer cross-subsidised by high-volume segments. Instead, at most multinational publishers, every segment – indeed, every book – is expected to be profitable in its own right. This segmentation has driven a shift around the globe away from mid-list titles, which is precisely where literary fiction and non-fiction sit in most publishers’ lists. The availability of this same information has had a significant effect on bookshop ordering patterns. As payment in kind for supplying BookScan with data, Australian booksellers receive BookScan bestseller lists for free. Many now tend to order on the basis of what is already selling according to the lists, creating a self-generating effect, again to the detriment of mid-list titles.

The increased segmentation of the book market sits alongside other forms of fragmentation typical of information-based societies. These include the fragmentation of audiences and of leisure time, both of which impact on book publishing. In Australia expenditure on books has fallen as a proportion of the total leisure spending, from twenty-nine per cent to twenty-five per cent between 2000 and 2005, amidst worldwide reports of a decline in literary reading, especially among the young.¹⁵ These trends fit with what Joe Moran has described as ‘a general trend towards demassification of the mass media audience’, the growth of ‘interactive multimedia’, ‘niche’ markets and a trend to ‘narrow-casting’.¹⁶ The decline of the literary paradigm, too, has been occasioned by fragmentation within the education system. In secondary school English this has included the decline of core curricula, a gradual shift away from standardised reading lists, and a growing

emphasis on film, media and multimedia texts. Analysis of the undergraduate offerings of leading Australian universities shows an overall decline in the teaching of contemporary Australian literature.¹⁷ Seen in these terms the literary paradigm can be understood as a particular postwar formation, in part driven by the cohort of students that passed through university arts faculties between the 1950s and the 1980s, and who, armed with Leavisite educations and steeped in the struggles of the post-1950s cultural nationalist moment, became its core audience.

It would be wrong to suggest that this trend to informationism is driven by the naturally unfolding developments of technological progress. From the outset, at every step of the way, technological change has been aided and supported by regulatory change. This is a political process, occasioned by the rise of the new conservatism since the late 1960s, and the subsequent rise of neo-liberal free-market economics. It is also a process driven by commercial imperatives such as a need for patentability, novelty and the monopolisation of markets, by the need to extend the reach and speed of trading on international networks, and to increase profits and market share, and shore up share prices. Digital technology has radically compressed the time it takes to produce books and contracted the spaces across which they are produced and marketed (outsourcing to South Asia, the reach of Amazon.com). Less and less do these processes take place in the extended 'clock time' of traditional production sequences, as a growing number of steps in the manufacturing and selling of books (such as the sharing of files within workgroups, the transfer of files during production and the dissemination of title information during marketing) take place as 'real time' processes of the sort that Castells argues are emblematic of information-capitalism. This process is itself driven by the need to compress production cycles and accelerate market cycles so as to maximise return on investment, and to reach out to new markets. As such the decline of the literary paradigm is part of a wider trend to the commodification of all cultural forms that is typical of the drive within neo-liberal societies to transform social relationships of the sort that once underpinned literary production, with its reliance on government support, coterie culture and education systems, into market relationships wherein all potentially profitable forms of cultural

production become media properties. The decline of literary publishing and the crisis of mid-list publishing is itself a global phenomenon, and has attracted wide comment in the USA in particular. As a recent *New York Times* article noted, ‘Knock-offs of *The Da Vinci Code*, made-up memoirs and accounts of life with ornery pets are selling tens of thousands of hardcover copies a week. But publishers say there is no harder sell in the world of books these days than literary fiction.’¹⁸

Similar declines have been noted as economies have been liberalised in countries as different as France and China.

Just as the changes to the public sphere over the past three decades are piecemeal and incomplete so the decline of the literary paradigm is in no way total. In cultural terms there is currently a mingling of the old and new, as part of a wider struggle over cultural value. Literary journals such as *ABR* and *Meanjin* and the books pages of broadsheet newspapers have set themselves up as nostalgic guardians of a (mid-list) literary culture at odds with both the ‘postmodernist’ academy and the new commercial imperatives. Their valorisation of old-fashioned notions of aesthetics and artistic autonomy can be understood as part of an attempt to recover art as a space sealed off from market forces. Literary culture is supported, too, by the academic formations that continue to study it, by its individual advocates in both small and large publishing houses, by members of marginalised groups who continue to champion the novel as an arena for political struggle, and by a new generation of enthusiasts interested both in its cultish appeal and its possibilities for cultural regeneration.¹⁹ The cultural nationalist project of the 1960s to late-1990s, in which publishers competed for prestige, has otherwise ended, with literature having become, in most publishers’ lists and marketing strategies, one genre among many.

It is reasonably safe to predict that the activities of reading, studying, writing and publishing literary fiction will increasingly become the preserve of a rump of ‘true believers’. Literary fiction will be published in two strands. At major publishers its faithful will gather around a select list of mid-list titles, often published against the grain or under literary sub-imprints, so as to garner prestige and foster credibility among their independent bookseller clients (who have

retained their market power despite the rise of book chains and discount department stores). Often such books will be packaged as fetish objects designed to evoke the memory of a literary culture, in small (gift) hardcover formats with deckled (rough-cut) edges, head and tail bands (to evoke a memory of stitched binding), marbled endpapers, place-marker ribbons and so on. Their content will itself tend to the *belle-lettres*. This small contingent of high-credibility artisan titles will be published in the wake of literary blockbuster 'event books', often published globally, signed up and marketed to the big advance model that is itself an important part of publishers' marketing strategies for key prestige titles. Martin Amis's *The Information*, the sales of which were ultimately disappointing, is nevertheless a good example of how this system works. Amis sacked his agent and employed Andrew Wylie, who sold the book for a £500,000 advance in a hotly contested 'auction' between competing publishers. The headlines that accompanied the large advance served as the first stage of the book's marketing campaign (publication was brought forward two months to capitalise on the publicity), followed by a teaser campaign and billboards.²⁰ Australian author Chloe Hooper's *A Child's Book of True Crime* was sold this way, also by Wylie, who, on the Australian leg of his world rights sales tour for the book, holed up with Hooper in the Sydney's waterfront Park Hyatt hotel fielding offers from local publishers before reportedly settling on a reputed \$75,000 offer from Random House, which was added to the reported US\$750,000 and £100,000 already paid by US and UK publishers for their territorial rights.²¹

Literary fiction will otherwise become the preserve of independent publishers and self-publishing. The consolidation of publishing has resulted in a counter-movement from established independent publishers such as Text Publishing and Scribe, who have sought to exploit the potential of niche-audience mid-list titles as profit-making prospects in small lists. In 2004 Text formed a partnership with Scottish publisher Canongate to maximise the value of both lists. New small presses such as Vulgar and Giramondo attempt to offer a home and space for aesthetic freedom for mid-list authors disenchanted with mainstream publishers, such as Andrew McCann (who recently moved from HarperCollins to Vulgar), or with whom mainstream publishers

have become disenchanted, such as Brian Castro (now at Giramondo).²² Confronted by the new market conditions, other literary writers have begun to look at ways of reinventing themselves, either turning to a blockbuster model or else looking overseas.²³ The increasing difficulty of getting published has fostered an underground push for change and a search for new paradigms, reflected in the rise of alternative literary festivals, a live reading circuit, and self-publishing through make-your-own imprints such as Vandal Press and Cardigan Press (both collectives that publish short story collections). Such developments point to how literature might become a do-it-yourself culture that will operate, for the time being, at least partly outside mainstream publishing culture, having cleared itself a space for experimentation and the development of new paradigms, as seen in new publications such as *The Sleepers Almanac*.²⁴

Perhaps the biggest problem with the literary paradigm was that it did not prove profitable, and always required external, non-market support to survive. It was a paradigm driven not by its commercial viability, but by cultural nationalism, communities of enthusiasts, the education system and government funding. As the imperatives of the literary paradigm have faded, so the industry as a whole has prospered. The proportion of titles published locally has increased alongside exports and overseas rights sales, while the number of local authors with overseas contracts has risen sharply.²⁵

Despite this success, questions about cultural value nevertheless remain. Literature once had a special role to play in advocating such values. Since the nineteenth century, the coterie elites that literary cultures nurtured have produced leading public intellectuals, a founding duty of literature having been, after all, to 'heal nations' and save their citizens from the worst excesses of capital.²⁶ Such figures continue to exist but in most cases they are unrepresentative and have no truly popular sway. Attempts to resurrect their prestige and that of the literary-intellectual culture that sustained them, in anthologies of essays and new magazines and in ritualistic attempts to talk the literary novel back into cultural prominence, are ever more unconvincing. Quite simply, there can be no going back, because the cultural nationalist, protectionist moment is over. The problem is not merely literary

– it is one of founding a genuinely popular critique of neo-liberal marketisation, even as the traditional intellectual bases from which such critiques spring, including literary culture, have been sidelined.

¹ The BookScan figures in this essay are used with kind permission of BookScan Australia.

² Julian Lee, 'Publishers Shun Rookie Authors', *Sydney Morning Herald* 22 May 2004.

³ Jason Steger, 'Book Contest Miles Behind', *Age* 23 June 2005, retrieved 23 June 2005 from <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/books/miles-behind/2005/06/22/1119321790686.html?oneclick=true>>

⁴ Malcolm Knox, 'The Ex-Factor', *Monthly* (May 2005): 54.

⁵ Search of Auslit database 3 August 2005. Search criteria include literary novels and novellas published by the top ten publishers as ranked by BookScan in 2004, and exclude titles designated on the database as extracts, crime, romance, young adult, humour, fantasy, thriller, sci-fi and horror. Non-literary popular fiction titles were manually excluded. The 1996 figures do not include the Heinemann imprints of Minerva and Mandarin, which are no longer published in Australia, and which between them published seven literary novels that year.

⁶ Brian Castro, 'Parleying Apocalypse: The Death of the Novel and the Decline of Contempt', public lecture, University of Melbourne, 9 May 2005; James Ley, 'The Tyranny of the Literal', *Australian Book Review* (April 2005): 32-38; Knox, 'The Ex-Factor'.

⁷ Jenny Lee, 'Against the Odds: Australian Book Publishers Become Global', *Logos* 15 (2004): 156.

⁸ Juliana Nam and Margaret Calvert, 'Intellectual Property Law Alert: Will the Aust-US FTA Lead to an Extra 20 years of Copyright Duration of Works in Australia?', Ebsworth & Ebsworth Lawyers, 27 January 2004, retrieved 29 July 2005 from <http://www.ebsworth.com.au/ebsworth/website/eepublishing.nsf/Content/Publication_Alert_IP_27Jan04>

⁹ Edward S. Herman and Robert Waterman McChesney, 'The Global Media', in David Held and Anthony G. McGrew (eds), *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, U.K: Polity Press in association with Blackwell, 2003), p.220.

¹⁰ Lee, 'Against the Odds', p.154.

¹¹ Albert Greco, *The Book Publishing Industry* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997), pp.104-5.

¹² Tim Elliot, 'The Biggest Fiction: Bestseller Lists Run the Industry', *Australian Financial Review*, Observer, 13-14 July 2002, pp.13-14.

¹³ Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Vol. 1: The Rise of the Network Society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996), p.66.

¹⁴ Peter F. Drucker, 'The Coming of the New Organization', [1988] in *Harvard Business Review on Knowledge Management* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Michael Webster, 'Publishing and Communications Program Industry Lecture', The University of Melbourne, 2 August 2005; National Endowment for the Arts, 'Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America,' Research Division Report no. 46, June 2004, retrieved 8 July 2004 from <<http://www.arts.gov:591/pub/index.html>>

¹⁶ Joe Moran, 'The Role of Multimedia Conglomerates in American Trade Book Publishing', *Media, Culture & Society* 19 (1997): 452-3.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Jenny Lee for conversations about her ongoing research on the teaching of Australian literature in leading Australian universities.

¹⁸ Edward Wyatt, 'Literary Novels Going Straight to Paperback', *New York Times* 22 March 2006, retrieved 26 March 2006 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/22/books/22pape.html?_r=1&oref=slogin&pagewanted=print>; 'Jane Austen Doe' (pseudonym) (2004) 'The Confessions of a Semi-Successful Author', *Salon.com*, 22 March 2004 <<http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2004/03/22/midlist/print.html>>; Jason Epstein, *Book Business* (NY: Norton, 2000); Phil Mattera, 'Crises of the Midlist Author in American Book Publishing', *National Writers Union*, 2004 <<http://www.nwu.org/book/midlist.htm>>; Sara Nelson, 'For Love or Numbers: BookScan's Fickle Fingers of Fate', *Publishers Weekly* 7 March 2005, p.10; Jana Riess, 'The Numbers Game: Tools like BookScan and STATS are Changing the Way Publishers do Business', *Publishers Weekly* 14 March 2005, p.27; André Schiffrin, *The Business of Books: How International Conglomerates Took over Publishing and Changed the Way We Read* (London: Verso, 2001).

¹⁹ I am indebted to Simon During for his description of the basic criteria on which mine are based, 'Displaced Geeks: Aus Lit Studies Now', *UTS Review* 3 (1997): 227.

²⁰ Juliet Gardiner, 'What is an Author?', *Publishing Research Quality* 16 (2000): 63-76.

²¹ Caroline Lurie, 'Book Deals: The New Aussie Rules', *Australian Author* (August 2001): 8-14.

²² Andrew McCann, 'How to Fuck a Tuscan Garden', *Overland* 177 (2004): 14.

²³ Andrew McGahan has turned to popular blockbuster literary fiction with *The White Earth*, which, from a marketing and readership point of view, takes him to some degree into Tim Winton territory; Christos Tsiolkas (*Dead Europe*) and Delia Falconer (*The Lost Thoughts of Soldiers*), have both recently published novels clearly intended for both local and overseas audiences.

²⁴ *The Sleepers Almanac* follows in the footsteps of similar US and UK publications such as *McSweeney's*, *The Believer* and *Zembla*. One of the striking things about the recent despair from the literary establishment about the decline of literary publishing is their lack of touch with recent street-level developments in Australian fiction.

²⁵ Lee, 'Against the Odds'; 'Book Publishers 2003-04', Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005). Since the deregulation of copyright laws in 1991, exports are up, as are overseas rights sales – more than 53 per cent in the past two years. The

number of literary agencies' clients with overseas contracts has increased from less than 5 per cent in 1991, to 20 per cent in 2001. The market share of locally published titles has increased from barely 10 per cent of Australian book sales in 1970 to 48.6 per cent in 1989, and 64 per cent in 2001/02, the last decades' increase coming in tandem with declining protection. Profit margins have steadily increased since a slump in 2001 (due to the introduction of GST), to an industry average of 9.7 per cent in 2003/04.

²⁶ As George Gordon, an early Oxford Professor of English, announced in his inaugural address: 'England is sick, and...English literature must save it. The churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature now has a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the state.' Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p.23. Gordon's remarks follow from Arnold's view in the 1880s that poetry is capable of 'saving' post-Darwinian society.



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Title:

The decline of the literary paradigm in Australian publishing

Date:

2006-08

Citation:

Davis, M. (2006). The decline of the literary paradigm in Australian publishing. *Ten Years, Heat 12 (new series)*, 12, 91-108.

Publication Status:

Published

Persistent Link:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34733>

File Description:

The decline of the literary paradigm in Australian publishing