

Newsletter

PO Box 576, Neutral Bay Junction, NSW 2089

Next meeting: 2 September 1987

Katherine Brisbane of Currency Press will speak on publishing drama and the problems involved in editing drama texts, which often go through substantial revision in the process of first production. Together with Philip Parsons, Katherine founded Currency Press in 1971. It is now far and away the largest publisher of Australian drama. Katherine is more publicly known as a theatre critic.

The meeting will be held in the Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre as usual, but please note that the time has been changed to 7.15 pm. The cost of the meeting is \$5.00, which includes wine and snacks. RSVP to Juliet on 211 0244 by Monday 31 August.

Last meeting

Have you ever dreamed of becoming rich and famous, and decided to seek your fortune as an author of Mills and Boon romances? Well, if you possess the flair and are prepared to work hard, and can manage several books a year, you just might make your dream come true—but don't hold your breath.

At last month's meeting, on 22 July, M/s Valerie Parv showed us the way. Valerie is that rare bird, an author who makes a good living out of writing and enjoys the work. She's also an engaging and informative speaker.

Half of all paperpacks sold throughout the world are romances; Australia, Brazil and the Netherlands provide the biggest markets per capita. Readers may be any age from eight to eighty and of any educational

background. The readership is overwhelmingly female, but it's hard to discern any other common denominator save that romance readers are generally not watchers of soap operas, an unexpected revelation.

Mills and Boon (M&B) are a very old firm of publishers, originally British, but now owned by the *Toronto Star*, which also owns Silhouette, M&B's one-time competitor in the US. Australian authors submit their MSS to M&B in London. Though M&B publish perhaps ten of the 6000 unsolicited MSS they receive per year, the market remains so voracious that they are always interested in new authors.

They require, initially, an outline of your book plus three chapters. That is enough for them to make a decision. But before you start scribbling, read and analyse a pile of M&Bs, the more the better, and not any job lot from the local fete, but the latest on the bookstands. And if you can, forecast what will be wanted two years from now: the readership is very selective and its tastes are changing all the time.

Valerie Parv came to the field five years ago, from work on practical books—such gut-wrenching titles as *How to Clean Your Swimming Pool* and *How to Grow Herbs*. When she undertook a book on plumbing and began her working days with research into sewage systems, she decided it was time for a change. After intense research analysing other authors' M&Bs and looking for some fresh story idea that she would be happy working on, she wrote and submitted her first romance, *Love's Greatest Gamble*. M&B accepted it. By now she has sold about nine million copies of her romances worldwide. They have been translated into many languages. She usually writes four per year and has not had any rejections, although sometimes her editor will ask for a lot of changes—all of which she makes. She has the highest regard for the input of editors.

Valerie averred that writing romantic fiction is difficult, stimulating and great fun. M&B require, first and foremost, an original story. *There is no story formula*, although there is a plot convention: at the outset a pair of characters (a woman and a man) confront some obstacle, that seems to prevent their ever becoming a couple; their chequered progress towards eventual

union makes up the substance of the tale, which always, always, ends happily. Humour is most welcome, but not tongue-in-cheek, patronising humour. An Australian background preferably country rather than city, is ideal, but it should be of a Colleen McCullough not Frank Moorhouse nature: no dust and flies, thanks! Research on detail should be meticulous. Romances mirror what's happening in social mores: nowadays the heroines generally have a career while the men have become more vulnerable, more caring. And under the shadow of AIDS, the books contain little if any general sleeping-around. The tone should be light and attractive, and the story told from the woman's point of view. These are women's fantasies.

M&Bs advance to a new author is \$1000, paid on publication; to their experienced and successful authors as high as \$10 000. Royalties are paid at a rate of 4%, but the print run can be around a million, and an author may expect to earn about \$20 000 per book. However, romance readers are more discriminating than is often thought, and eventual sales are directly related to the popularity of the book. Further royalties may also come in from translations. Valerie compared her present income favourably with that from her best-known 'real' book, *The Changing Face of Australia*, which cost her many months of hard work and was successful, but earned her only \$3000.

Before you decide to try your hand at romantic fiction, one word of warning: if you feel you are lowering yourself or if you are trying it just for the money, you will probably fail. You have to really *want* to write a romance, and believe in it while you are writing. If you succeed you will be in good company: Somerset Maugham, Georgette Heyer, Jean Plaidy and Agatha Christie all wrote for Mills and Boon at some stage of their careers.

Josephine Bastian

Conferences

The European Association of Science Editors is planning its third conference and general assembly at Basel, Switzerland, from 24 to 27 May 1988. The conference covers a wide range of subjects, through talks, workshops,

demonstrations and video presentations.

The International Association of Scholarly Publishers will hold its fourth international conference, on the subject of 'The Future of Small Presses in Scholarly Publishing' in Helsinki, Finland, from 1 to 3 June 1988.

For further details on these conferences, please ring Juliet Richters at the FPA, telephone 211 0244.

Nightmares

Correspondence

From Robyn Colman in Tasmania.

Dear Adriaan,

Editors have an undeserved reputation for being verbal police, people who will pounce on a so-called split infinitive and not only care about the 'split', but hold the perpetrator up to public ridicule.

When asked 'What do you do?', I have a number of possible replies to make. I can say, 'I'm a public servant', which leaves me open to diatribes about the wickedness of flextime, overgenerous leave entitlements and general public sector incompetence and waste. I can say, 'I work for the Education Department', which invites uninformed and often vicious comment on the 'poor standard' of literacy and numeracy in 'young people nowadays'. But when I say, 'I'm an editor in the Education Department's publishing unit', I provoke clapping of hands over mouths, a droll shifting from foot to foot, and the witty observation 'Ooooh! I'd better be very careful of what I say, then!'

This experience is not rare. Last year there was useful public debate about an editor's responsibilities to texts and authors, yet only last month I heard a historian taking an opportunity on a nationally broadcast radio program to complain about editors sprinkling her manuscripts with semicolons.

Since we have a reputation in the community at

large for being pedantic, is a 'Nightmares' column good for our image? Should it not at least be counterbalanced by a collection of gems?

Yours sincerely,
Robyn Colman

PS Please forgive my impertinence in writing this letter, when I'm not even a member of your society. I do enjoy reading your newsletter and we're grateful to be sent a copy in Tasmania. But I do feel strongly about our image!

Dear Robyn,

You are absolutely right: it would be unbearably oppressive to have nightmares only. Let us by all means enjoy our sweeter dreams, too. I confess that I strayed rather far from my original idea, which was a continuing discussion on usage—disputed, abhorred or commended. I must also confess, though, that I don't feel the same way about our image as you do. First of all, being verbal police is only a small part of editing, whatever the popular notion (and I seem to strike blank faces mainly), but it may not be all that disreputable either.

Let us look at things from the bright side for a moment. We may soon see our helmet and baton become the visible insignia of our membership of a very exclusive class of people: those who are not merely capable of *speaking* English, but of actually *writing* it, too. We will be able to wear them as a badge of honour.

Nobody appears to be altogether happy about misspellings and incorrect grammatical usage to appear in print. Yet very few people are prepared to concede that it might take a considerable investment in time and effort to educate people to spell and use grammar correctly. This is, of course, very fortunate for our profession, as we owe our livelihood to it.

Keith McLennan's collection of student atrocities in the last newsletter was culled for the purpose of being entertaining, but it does give a hopeful picture of the literacy of the latest generation of university-educated members of society. Similarly, we may be happy to note that in the current controversy about spelling standards

the radical spirit ('We live in a post-literate society—there is no need to teach spelling and grammar any more') seems to be gaining the upper hand. On 27 July the leader writer of the *Sydney Morning Herald* pronounced what he obviously thought was a conciliatory verdict, to pacify conservative and radical educational extremists alike. He wrote: 'By 1990 there will be spelling lists, it [the Department of Education] says, but the lists will relate "to those used in children's writings". That is sensible enough.' While 'sensible' is not the word I would have chosen, our profession certainly has no cause for complaint. This is sure to keep the mental spelling age of yet another generation low enough to safeguard our continued employment. The fewer people are trained in the proper use of language, the better. Soon editors will be able to command rates similar to those charged by other professions in the possession of arcane knowledge, such as typewriter repairmen.

In the meantime, the best we can do is prepare ourselves for the arduous and responsible task ahead. The newsletter welcomes questions, queries, criticism and praise—indeed any contribution that may foster discussion on linguistic usage.

Solecisms

The July newsletter of the Society of Editors (Tas) announces that Adrian Colman is collecting examples of ungrammatical, inept or misleading expressions, for use in a university course called 'Professional English'. He cites the following as an example of the sort of material he is looking for:

Councillors admitted that nude bathing was practised on one of Clarence's beaches, but that burying their heads in the sand would not solve the situation.

To help Professor Colman on his way, the newsletter is organising a linguistic competition involving solecisms for its readers.

Linguistic competition

The following are four examples of poor English usage:

1. Illiteracy is no shame, but being a writer it can be

a drawback. (*From an unpubl. MS*)

2. This is no better shown than in the chapter where...
(*The Australian, 14 Feb 1987*)

3. Australia's most successful performance at the Olympics was at Melbourne in 1956, when as host nation thirteen gold medals were won, five better than the next best effort, at Rome in 1960. (*From an uncorrected galley proof*)

4. At least two companies in recent years, retailers Buckley and Nunn and Waltons, were taken over by first making offers to the company's pension funds which were simply too good to refuse. (*The Australian, 20 Feb 1987*)

If you would like to enter the competition, here is how it works.

Conditions

1. How to enter: complete the entry form enclosed with this newsletter, answering all questions; entering your own example of a solecism; and printing clearly your name and address. Entries should be sent in fully franked envelopes to: The Editor, Society of Editors (NSW) Newsletter, 88 Wolseley Road, Point Piper, NSW 2027, postmarked no later than 8.9.1987. 2. Multiple entry is permitted, provided that each entry contains a fresh solecism. 3. Entries are judged on a. the nature and/or correctness of the answers provided; b. the enormity of the solecism submitted; c. the eminence of its perpetrator. 4. There are three prizes: a first prize and two consolation prizes. The first prize is a copy of Stephen Murray-Smith's recently published *Right Words: A Guide to English Usage in Australia*; the two consolation prizes consist in one year's free membership of the Society of Editors (NSW). 5. The judges' decision is final, but all correspondence will be entered into. 6. All entries will be made available for educational purposes to Professor A. Colman of the English department of the University of Tasmania.

Mr Fisher “handsomely entertained”

Mr Jeremy Fisher, immediate past president of the Society of Editors (NSW), recently addressed the Singapore Society of Editors at a gathering in the National Library of Singapore. Some fifteen members of the Singapore society had 'not fallen asleep' during his talk, as Mr Fisher put it. The subject of the address had been 'two hundred years of Australian publishing'. The Singapore society had 'handsomely entertained' Mr Fisher, and he urged members passing through Singapore to get in touch. The present president is M/s Shova Loh, who can be contacted at Time Books International, on Singapore 284 8844.

Committee members

Juliet Richters (president) —211 0244 (Family Planning Association)
 Anne Sahlin (treasurer)—467 2793 (freelance)
 Josephine Bastian (minutes)—660 7107 (freelance)
 Adriaan van der Weel (newsletter)—327 3658 (freelance)
 Shirley Jones (freelance register)—86 3927 (freelance)
 Dallas Cox (newsletter)—047-36 0228 (Nepean CAE)
 Jeremy Fisher (immediate past president)—517 8999
 (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich)
 Heather Dalton (meetings)—922 4620 (freelance)