

He fell into publishing; now he can't get out

At the society's June meeting Brian Cook told members he started his Manuscript Appraisal Agency because aspiring writers need feedback that publishers just aren't able to give.

I feel like saying, 'Hello, my name's Brian Cook and I'm an alcoholic.' But of course what I want to say is, 'My name's Brian Cook and I'm *not* a copy editor', which is like a drug addiction I imagine. I've been in publishing for 28 years now. I don't know how that happened. I fell into it when my (then) wife said, 'You need a job and we need a car',

and I got a job (with a car) as a sales rep with Golden Press. When I went to the UK in 1974 I thought I'd get a job doing something else, but it didn't work out that way. I ended up working at McGraw Hill for six years.

Publishing is one of those things that when you're hooked, you can't get away from it. You think you'd like to do some-

thing else, but there's nothing else you'd rather do than deal with people and their intellectual property, and the way they develop what they're working on.

I started the Manuscript Appraisal Agency for a couple of reasons. One, I needed to do some work. I was fortunate enough after 11 years at HarperCollins to receive a redundancy package. I left that organisation with very good relationships, but and it was time for me to move on. I walked the beach for three months, thinking, 'I'm going to stay away from publishing; it just drives me crackers'. Then I realised that it was the publishing process that was one of the things that motivated me in life. Dealing with people and their aspirations motivated me, and I did it well.

One of things I saw at HarperCollins was the inability of the publisher to respond to authors who were trying to progress their craft. The slush pile at HarperCollins received 2,000 manuscripts a year. The very best the company could 'afford' to do was send the material back to the author saying 'thanks, but not right for us'. The letters were very polite, they were courteous, and they said absolutely nothing. What sense did an author have of, 'Is my work worth anything? How's it coming along?'

Next meeting: Tuesday 7 July 1998

Publishing and editing for young readers with Robin Morrow and Wendy Blaxland

What is the current state of children's book publishing? What kinds of books are being published? What special challenges does children's literature provide for editors? What about the different needs of teen and children's markets? Then there are the demands of the unique editorial processes associated with picture books, which involve working closely with both illustrators and authors—as well as designers and the rest of the production chain.

Robin Morrow, editor and critic, has been involved with children's literature for many years. She is the children's book reviewer for the *Australian* and was a recent judge for the NSW Premier's Award. Wendy Blaxland has published over 25 children's books, both fiction and non-fiction. She has reviewed children's books, and edited children's books for Random House and Scholastic.

Non-members welcome. 6.30 pm for 7 pm in the Rooftop Function Centre, 4th floor, Australian Museum (enter from William Street). Drinks and light refreshments provided. Please **RSVP by Friday 3 July** to (02) 9294 4999 (voicemail). Members \$12; non-members and those who don't RSVP, \$15.

continued on page 2

Appraise

continued from page 1

If I were to pursue it, would it be worth my while, and is it saleable?

My colleagues and peers at other publishing houses were expressing the same observation, that as much as there was a fear that they might just miss something fabulous in the slush pile, they couldn't afford to get to it. And they didn't want to offend people and, apart from the nutters, they didn't want to give a negative response to anyone and turn them off because that's not a publisher's role or prerogative, and they are mindful of this.

One of my skills was talking to people about their work and how it was progressing. Admitting right from the start that I'm not a copy editor, I've always had an editorial eye. As a publisher, I had copy editors and commissioning editors working around me, and they trained me. I left HarperCollins knowing how to spot problems in a manuscript and not be afraid to tell the author that there is a problem.

So, warts and all, the Manuscript Appraisal Agency sets out to offer first-time and experienced writers an unbiased opinion—an editorial and commercial overview of the work they are undertaking. We don't tell people how to fix things; we tell them what we perceive

to be out of balance, inconsistent, wrong, dangerous. It's our opinion. It's left to the author to decide what they do with it. If it stinks, I tell them.

When I say *I* tell them, I do some of it, but a number of people work for me. (I'm becoming a trafficker!) If it's not working, we tell people why. We may make observations and suggestions, and we may raise those in the form of a question. The appraisal is two to three pages, depending how buzzed up we get about it. When we send the appraisal and manuscript back to the author, I contribute a commercial assessment as well to give them some idea as to what they can expect financially or how the market's doing, or who's doing what. We never offer to publish the book.

We turn our appraisals around in about five weeks. We currently charge a standard rate of \$250 to do the appraisal. I say currently, because I've made a decision that, as of 1 July, the \$250 will apply to a manuscript of up to 70,000 words, and we'll charge \$50 per additional 50,000 words.

I have a small group of editors who work at home. Many of them have full-time jobs and they do this for fun, for their own education. They have about three weeks in which to read through the work and come back with the appraisal. Then they send it back to me with an invoice, and I take it from there.

How much am I paying to do these appraisals, I hear you ask? I'm still very uncertain about this, because we all know (here's the apology before I give the figure) that the amount of time you invest in preparing for an appraisal, even before you put pen to paper, is huge. I'm a slow reader by comparison with many, but I have very good comprehension and I only have to read a manuscript once. I believe I can't charge for that time. I charge for the time to write the appraisal. I started paying myself \$25. I then gave myself a salary increase to \$40. Great, isn't it? I'm now paying \$60 and I'm about to go to \$80. And when there's a manuscript of between 70,000 and 120,000 words, I'll be paying \$100.

About three days after the manuscript is returned to the author with their appraisal, I ring them up and say to them, 'Well, you got your appraisal. How did you get on with it? Have you got any queries?' Some pretty stinky appraisals have gone back to people, and each and every author is so grateful that you speak to them because they just want to talk to somebody about what they're doing. They say, 'Thank you for saying that that part didn't work, because I actually knew that. You've given me some guidance and direction and... thank you'.

The other thing I try to do, particularly when the manuscript actually isn't too bad, and you can see that you've got a writer on your hands, is to talk to them about thinking about how they will market their book, what the market is like, who the publishers are. So many authors don't think about what their book might look like in the book shop. What might it stand alongside? On what shelf? How long is it? What size? Is it portrait or landscape? How much do I expect people to pay for this book? And which publisher is doing what? They just don't think about it.

I also find myself counselling writers when they say things like, 'I've just read the latest Jeffrey Archer and really it's a load of old cobblers and I write so much better than Jeffrey Archer'. I say to them, 'Well, you may write better than Jeffrey Archer, but hey, who are you? Think about it from the publisher's point of view, the investment and the marketing arm that the publisher has behind Jeffrey Archer. How do new authors fit into the scheme of things?' If they want to fit into that scheme of things, how will they go

Society of Editors (NSW) Inc.

PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007; Voicemail: (02) 9294 4999

Membership

Membership of the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc. is open to anyone working as an editor in the print media, and anyone who supports the society's aims.

Membership runs for a calendar year. 1998 fees are \$45 for new members (\$25 if joining after 30 June) and \$40 for renewals.

For a membership application form, phone (02) 9294 4999, or write to PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007.

Blue Pencil

The society's newsletter, *Blue Pencil*, is published monthly, except for a combined January/February issue. Your comments and contributions are welcome. Mail them to Merry Pearson at 55 Collins St, North Narrabeen, NSW 2101, or fax or e-mail them to her as per the contact details on the back page.

Deadline for the August issue is Monday 13 July.

Committee meetings

All members are welcome to attend the society's committee meetings. The next meeting will be held on Monday 13 July at 6 pm at the Graphic Arts Club, 12-26 Regent Street, Sydney. You are also welcome to join those committee members who stay on to enjoy a fine Chinese meal.

about selling themselves and their skills as a resource to a particular publisher?

Do I act as a literary agent? I didn't set out to do that, but then you get buzzed up by something, and think, 'Crikey! This is great, this could be big...'. You talk to the author and you think, 'This person is a *writer*, I think I want to be part of what they're doing'...and I've got three clients now! None of them have been published yet, but I have hopes for them and so do they.

How in-depth an analysis would you give a 70,000 word manuscript? Do you get down to general structure of the book, or do you say, 'Fix this passage here in Chapter X'?

Generally not. If people want that, we can connect them with editors who will work directly with them for an hourly rate. About structure, we might say, 'There are some gaps in the story. The characters were not complete. There were some inconsistencies. Why did this happen? Why did that happen?'

I've just had one book come back, though. The first time, it was so dull, you wouldn't get past the first 30 pages. But I was paid to read it, so I did. With this particular story, I had suggested to the author that the book didn't get going until about a third of the way through where there was a scene with the *mafioso* in New York. It was lively and the characters were great. I asked if that could be the opening of the book. The manuscript came back yesterday and, sure enough, there it is sitting at the front. I won't read that book again because I don't want to prejudice it. I've sent that off to someone else.

We don't get down to really nitty gritty. That's what I see as being copy and structural editing. We want a publisher to know that the book has been worked on, that it's been developed, and that the writer has been conscientious and proactive in ensuring that they've got the very best possible product as they see it. But we also tell people that we believe the publisher is going to want to tweak that manuscript in some way to fit their list, to stand alongside the Jeffrey Archer, if that's what it's going to do.

What form of wording do you use with the nutters? How precisely do you get rid of them?

Firstly, the nutters don't usually want to pay \$250, although some do. I've had

one, a book of '101 Original Limericks'. My opening line was, 'These are neither limericks nor original,' and proceeded to tell the person why. I instructed the person to go and *read* some limericks, and look in the dictionary to see what a limerick *is*. And again I had someone saying to me, 'Thank you so much for giving me some straight information, some straight advice'.

There are some people who genuinely can't write. And I say to them, 'It's clear that you enjoy the writing process. You may be writing in isolation. Look to joining a writing group, continue to enjoy your writing, but the prospect of your being published is not very good'. As gently as I can. You've got to be honest with them, and they appreciate it.

How many of the manuscripts you get do you consider to be drafts and how many do the writers consider to be a finished article? A lot of authors don't know that they're still offering a draft. You sometimes get a draft with a contract.

It's probably a 50/50 mix. I will say to people, 'In our opinion the manuscript is not ready to go to a publisher. It needs further work', and suggest how they might pursue that.

Is it mostly fiction that you get, and how many manuscripts do you get a year?

I would say that 70 per cent of the manuscripts that come to us are fiction. Appraising fiction is kind of easy. It's much more difficult to appraise non-fiction because it's about a publisher's list and where it fits in and you have to believe that the content is legitimate and works. You have to believe that the cookbook recipes are not going to kill the consumer, as a HarperCollins book on home brew once did! The entire print run had to be withdrawn because a recipe was lethal. You have to believe that what they're writing about is *bona fide*. The reference you give them is to the likelihood of its commercial success.

I started this business 12 months ago. I went to writers' centres, met people, put stuff out, and some people said, '\$250, who are you kidding?! I'm a writer, you should be pleased to see my work! I'll only pay you \$250 if you get it published', and stuff like that. It's not a lot of money, \$250, but it's not little money either. And what it's done is

sorted out those people who clearly have an intention to pursue their skills. I know that when people come to me, they're legitimate in their commitment to what they're doing. They may not be able to write, they may not have a future in it, but they're sincere about what they're doing, so obviously we treat them appropriately.

It is being a publishing consultant that allows me to survive, because there is no way I can survive on assessing manuscripts. Having said that, last month, I had a sort of watershed of people making inquiries which resulted in 16 manuscripts coming in. I certainly can't make a full-time living out of that, but it's quite a substantial response.

Do you only take full manuscripts? Or would you take a few chapters and an outline? And what would you charge for something like that?

Exactly the same. The base rate is \$250. We ask the author, 'What do *you* want? Do you want us to look at your style, do you want a response to how you're going, a response to the story or to its likelihood of success, or do you want to know if the manuscript is hanging together, is this book working or not?' It's entirely up to them. The basic rate is the basic rate. You come to us for advice, and this is the price we charge for our advice.

One of the comments I often have in regard to this is, 'Oh, yes, but this is only a children's book'. They're generally talking about the text for a 24-page picture book. But the skills that are required to write a responsible appraisal for a 24-page picture book are probably even greater than those required to pass an editorial judgment on 70,000 words because you have to be so accurate, so well informed, so specific. And you have to explain to people in a crystal clear manner the certain aspects of the text that they've developed. The longest appraisal I've done was on a 10,000 word kids' manuscript.

The most difficult thing I've found are books that are quite outside my range of reading. For instance, pornographic books, and I remember one killer thriller that I felt tremendous distaste for. I found it very hard to judge whether this could be published or not. Who do you send something like that to?

continued on page 4

COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

The 1998 committee met for the fourth time on Tuesday 9 June.

Accreditation issues

(Working group: Joe Beaumont, Cathy Gray, Jo Healy-North, Bruce Howarth, Rhana Pike)

Information gathering is continuing. A response to our inquiry was received from the Editors' Association of Canada—they have developed a set of standards for various areas of editorial activity, as well as a workbook entitled *Meeting Editorial Standards*, and are now working towards a certification scheme.

Promoting the register

(Working group: Cathy Gray, Catherine Hockings, Merry Pearson, Terry Johnston)

Leaflets will be distributed to Australian Publishers Association members in late June; work is proceeding on developing mailing lists.

Web site development

(Working group: Jean Weber, Bruce White, Kylie Lowson, Merry Pearson, Cathy Gray, Julian McAllan, Tim Power)

Material for the site is being written; the group is still investigating costs and service providers.

Ethics

(Subcommittee: Robin Appleton, John Fleming, Catherine Hockings, Terry Johnston, Tim Badgery-Parker)

Progress is being made on developing a draft 'code of desirable professional behaviours'; a structure has been devised based on editors' duties to different parties (e.g. author, publisher, reader).

Other issues:

- 25 people attended the society's Science and Technical Editing workshop on 16 May to hear speakers Robert Veel, Matthew Stevens, Rhana Pike and Gregory Heard.

- Quotes have been obtained for printing society membership cards and we should be able to send these out to you in the next couple of months; Abbey's Bookshop in Sydney has confirmed that they will be offering a 10 per cent discount to members. Please let Cathy Gray know if you have a favourite bookshop, stationery store or other supplier that you'd like us to approach.

- The society will again take a stall at the NSW Writers' Centre's Spring Writing Festival 12–13 September. If you have ideas about how to make our presence as effective as possible, or if you could spare a few hours to help staff the stall over the weekend, please call Isabel Partridge (see committee list on page 6).

If you'd like to contribute in any of these areas, contact one of the committee members involved (see committee list on page 6).

Appraise

continued from page 3

You look to build a team of people who have specific interests. It's totally inappropriate to try to pass an opinion about something if you're prejudiced or have difficulty with the work. There are some things we don't touch. Scientific, technical, academic, religious, poetry...oh, the number of poetry calls we get! But the rest of the stuff I'll take on board and go hunting for someone if I can't do it. And there is a market for pornography. There's nothing judgmental about any of this. My business is not whether or not I like the content of a manuscript; it's about whether it's presented in the best possible way.

Do you get literary agents coming to you with manuscripts?

Yes. Some literary agents are directing people to me. What they're actually doing is shifting the responsibility from themselves back to their author, and encouraging the author to invest a little more time and money in themselves. That makes their job easier, but it might also make the manuscript more successful.

When you give a good appraisal to someone and you say, 'This has got potential, try HarperCollins', do they then attach your appraisal to the manuscript when they send it off?

Yes. And a number of publishers are welcoming the appraisals as a guide post to what is in the content.

How do you assess a person's memoirs?

We focus very much on the story telling—the emotional connection we can have with the page—and where the book is going. And we offer that commercial perspective of, 'Who's going to be interested?' A lot of people have extremely interesting lives. But unless it's good story telling, who's interested? It's like any of the work that comes our way. If it's dull, we tell them it's dull.

What proportion of manuscripts that you see would you rate as having some potential?

Surprisingly enough, that rate is much higher than I thought it would be. Probably 20 per cent, certainly more than one in 10, has got real potential, either in its content or in the author's style. Whether

they have the application to get on and do it, fix it and do it, is another matter.

Brian Cook can be reached at the Manuscript Appraisal Agency, PO Box 80, Harbord NSW 2096; phone 9907 3774; fax 9907 3775.

What's in a word?

An anagram, as we all know, is a word or phrase made by rearranging the letters of another word or phrase. Here are some curious examples:

Dormitory = dirty room

Desperation = a rope ends it

The Morse Code = here come dots

Slot Machines = cash lost in 'em

Animosity = is no amity

Snooze Alarms = alas! no more Zs

Alec Guinness = genuine class

Semolina = is no meal

The Public Art Galleries = large picture halls, I bet

A Decimal Point = I'm a dot in place

The Earthquakes = that queer shake

Eleven plus two = twelve plus one

Contradiction = accord not in it

Could this be a life sentence?

Dear Editor,

I enjoyed the updated version of the Lord's Prayer (*Blue Pencil*, June 1998) and thought members might enjoy the following example of prolixity. I received it from a friend who lives in America, hence the references to the Declaration of Independence.

prolix adj 1: unduly prolonged or drawn out 2: given to verbosity and diffuseness in speaking or writing: long-winded

Example: The purpose of this sentence (which can also serve as a paragraph) is to speculate that if the Declaration of Independence had been worded and

structured as lackadaisically as this sentence has been so far there's no telling what kind of warped libertine society we'd be living in now or to what depths of decadence the inhabitants of this country might have sunk, even to the point of deranged and debased writers constructing irritatingly cumbersome and needlessly PROLIX sentences that sometimes possess the questionable if not downright undesirable quality of referring to themselves and they sometimes even become run-on sentences or

exhibit other signs of inexcusably sloppy grammar like unneeded superfluous redundancies that almost certainly would have insidious effects on the lifestyle and morals of our impressionable youth, leading them to commit incest or even murder and maybe that's why Billy is strangling his mother, because of sentences just like this one, which have no discernible goals or perspicuous purpose and just end up anywhere, even in mid
Isn't it a hoot!

Loretta Barnard



New venue needed

The Australian Museum has decided not to make its Terrace function room available for meetings next year. This means we're looking for a new venue. It should be:

- central, close to public transport and not too impossible for parking;
- flexible, and able to accommodate 20-40 people, both milling about and sitting down;
- able to be booked in advance for a whole year's meetings;
- able to accommodate eating and drinking (preferably allowing us to organise our own catering);
- pleasant; and not too expensive.

If you have any suggestions, please contact a committee member.

NT editors' society formed

Dear Editor:

As a direct result of a visit by Robin Appleton and with great encouragement and support from Marian Devitt of the NT Writers' Centre, the Society of Editors (NT) was formed in April of this year. We have chosen to remain informal for the moment and so have no office bearers or membership fees and are not incorporated.

We meet on the third Friday of each month at 9.00 am upstairs in the Roma Cafe, Cavenagh St, Darwin. At each meeting we hope to have an information

sharing session, a professional development session and time for general discussion. Everybody with an interest in editing is welcome, including freelance editors, self editors and editors in full-time and part-time employment in both the private and government sectors.

I am the contact person, at least until our next meeting. I can be reached at joyce.purcell@nt.gov.au or at Ministerial Liaison, NT Department of Education, GPO Box 4821, Darwin NT 0801.

Joyce Purcell

Editors are nowhere, categorically speaking

Dear Editor:

I was filling out the registration form for the Book Fair to be held this month in Melbourne and was surprised to discover that I had to include my occupation in the 'Other' box.

There were other notable omissions, such as publicist, but perhaps the Society of Editors could raise the profile of editors just a little by suggesting to the APA that 'Editor' be added to the list.

Sarah Baker

Australian editors' e-mail addresses

Matthew Stevens invited me to take over his "List of Australian Editors' E-mail Addresses", which I did earlier this week. You can see it at:

<http://www.pipeline.com.au/users/bangsund/eds-az.htm>.

John Bangsund

1998 COMMITTEE

President: Catherine Gray

Phone/fax : (02) 9130 8331 (w & h)

E-mail: cgray@mpx.com.au

Vice President: John Fleming

Phone: (02) 9529 8638 (w & h)

Fax: (02) 9529 9764

Secretary: Tim Badgery-Parker

Phone: (02) 9518 7225 (h)

(02) 9954 8645 (w)

Fax: (02) 9954 8699 (w)

E-mail: timbp@rpi.net.au

Membership Secretary: Rhana Pike

Phone: (02) 9569 7831 (h)

Fax: (02) 9569 1641 (h)

E-mail: rhanap@ozemail.com.au

Treasurer: Alicia Thompson

Phone: (02) 9909 3346 (w & h)

E-mail: alicia_mtb@one.net.au

Catering:

Merry Pearson (food, see newsletter editor)

Carey Martin (wine)

Phone: (02) 9816 3684 (h)

E-mail: cmartin@brw.fairfax.com.au

Newsletter Editor: Merry Pearson

Phone/fax: (02) 9913 7799 (w & h)

E-mail: mmripear@ozemail.com.au

Newsletter Assistant: Kylie Lowson

Phone: (02) 9560 5636 (h)

(02) 9518 6777 (w)

Fax: (02) 9518 6888 (w)

E-mail: k_lowson@hotmail.com

Publicity Officer: Terry Johnston

Phone/fax: (02) 9337 4126 (w & h)

Website Development:

Jean Weber

E-mail: jean_weber@compuserve.com

Julian McAllan

Phone/fax: (02) 9972 7030 (w & h)

E-mail: sciencedesk@msn.com

General Members:

Catherine Hockings

Phone/fax: (02) 9568 2618 (w & h)

E-mail: chocki01@postoffice.csu.edu.au

Isabel Partridge

Phone: (02) 9544 4389

Fax: (02) 9544 4398

E-mail: bigpic@bigpond.com.au

Robert Stove

Phone: (02) 9953 2614 (h)

(02) 9929 0099 (w)

Fax: (02) 9264 3906

E-mail: rjstove@acay.com.au

NOTICEBOARD

Good news, not-so-bad news

The good news is that we've found what we think will be a terrific venue for our planned workshop on successful freelancing: the theatre at the Australian Museum. The not-so-bad news is that the theatre is booked out for the duration of their egyptology exhibit, so our workshop now is scheduled for Saturday 17 October. Watch this space for details.

Spring events at the NSW Writers' Centre

Some dates for your diary: Clues on Grammar workshop with Robert Eagleson, 5 September; Spring Writing Festival and Workshops, 12-20 September; and Publishing Process and Principles of Editing course with Robin Appleton, 10, 11, 17, 18, 24, 25, 31 October and 1 November. Call the centre on (02) 9555 9757 for more information, or visit their website at <http://www.ozemail.com.au/~nswwc>

Women in Publishing

Women in Publishing will hold their annual general meeting on Tuesday, 14 July. Their next training program will be a multimedia seminar. Contact Wendy Blaxland—phone/fax (02) 9489 4955—or Vanessa Playford—phone (02) 9552 2200; fax (02) 9552 1681; or e-mail fedpress@ozemail.com.au

Sight these sites

Alta Vista, one of the best Web search engines
<http://www.altavista.digital.com>

Australian Society of Authors
<http://www.peg.apc.org/~asauthors>

Australian Society of Indexers
<http://www.zeta.org.au/~aussi>

Australian Society for Technical Communication
<http://www.users.bigpond.com/ASTC>

Bay Area Editors' Forum (US)
<http://www.editorsforum.org/index.html>

Canberra Society of Editors
<http://www.editors.dynamite.com.au>

dictionaries on the Net
<http://www.sau.edu/cwis/internet/wild/Refdesk/Encyclo/encindex.htm>

Editors' Association of Canada
<http://www.web.net/eac-acr>

Society of Editors (SA)
<http://www.adelaide.net.au/~sosedssa/>

Society of Freelance Editors and Proofreaders (UK)
<http://www.sfep.demon.co.uk/>

The Galley Club
<http://magnet.com.au/server/galleyclub/>

World Wide Web Virtual Library subject catalogue
<http://vlib.stanford.edu/Overview.html>