



THE EDITORS

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NEXT MEETING.....NEXT MEETING.....NEXT MEETING.....NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will be held at the Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre at 16 Fitzroy Street, on Wednesday 4 July 1984 at 6.30 pm.

Professor Arthur Delbridge and Alan Peterson will speak on 'Problems of Style'.

Arthur Delbridge is Professor of Linguistics at Macquarie University, Editor-in-Chief of the Macquarie Dictionary, and Chairman of the ABC's Standing Committee on Spoken English. He has recently been invited to serve on a committee to revise the Australian Government Style Manual.

Alan Peterson is News Editor of the Sydney Morning Herald, and for the past ten years has been responsible for the editorial style of the paper.

Please contact Monica Ardill on 406 4288 by Monday 2 July if you are attending.

LAST MEETING

The last meeting was held on 23 May, when the speaker was Margaret Jones. She has recently returned from London to become Literary Editor of the Sydney Morning Herald.

This is Margaret Jones' second appointment as Literary Editor of the Sydney Morning Herald - her first extended from 1969 to 1973, when she went to China as a foreign correspondent - and she began her talk with a comparison between the 'thens' and 'nows' of the literary world.

The differences are, in fact, considerable enough to be called revolutionary, since the time writer Russel Braddon said 'Any writer who publishes a book in Australia is a masochist'. There is still necessarily a limited market in Australia, but the most significant factor has been the establishment of Literature Board grants for writers, following the election of the Whitlam Government.

Margaret recalled the initial impact as a time of tremendous euphoria, the opening of a golden vein, both justified and unjustified. It was also in some instances a mad time, when grants were given on the strength of one short story or a handful of poems, a reaction against the philistinism of former policies.

The most important effect of this period was that seeds were sown, particularly among young people. In those days, Anne Summers was wrestling with her first book, Damned Whores and God's Police. She has now joined the establishment as the Prime Minister's adviser on women's affairs.

There is still argument over whether a good writer improves for starving in a garret, or whether money makes a writer lazy. There is criticism over the same names recurring in the lists of grants year after year. It is also true that we in Australia now have a system which others envy.

At the end of the 1960's, an author's earnings from writing alone averaged less than \$10.00 per week. Now a Senior Writer's Grant is worth \$22,000 per year, still not princely when compared with the Federal backbencher's \$36,000. There is another aspect in Australian publishing of the improved situation for writers. Margaret quoted British Literature Board representative at the last Adelaide Festival, David Harsens, as saying he was amazed at the harmony which exists in Australia, that he was struck by the way writers are neither grovelly and unduly grateful, nor simply taking the money, but that there is a general acceptance of the system.

Margaret then quoted Thomas Shapcott describing the range of the Board's grants to support writers of enormous differences, from the rough diamonds to the stylish in the best sense. The Literature Board has had an enormous impact, dispensing \$8 million on 935 grants. This has produced a literary explosion, and the Board points to the prizewinners they have subsidised. Awards also encourage writers.

It is now important to recognise that quality does not equal quantity in literature. The return has been something like a huge indigestible pudding - there are plums, and there is stodge as well. The time is coming for the Literature Board to stop funding the mediocre. After the current surge of gumnut nationalism, we are surely old enough for

a more sophisticated level. It has been the same with Australian films, which at first struck cinemagoers as fresh and charming. Ten years later, much the same thing is no longer so fresh or charming.

It is one reflection of the general situation that the Miles Franklin Award was not awarded for 1983. It is another that we have now some astonishingly good writers - Kenneally, White, West, Koch, Malouf, D'Alpuget, Garner, have all achieved new high standards of Australian writing.

One can also see change reflected in Writers Week at the Adelaide Festival. This used to be much stronger on promise than performance. Last time, the writers came - and afterwards visited other places in Australia. The One-way traffic of Australian writers overseas has halted. It is no longer necessary to leave.

The feminist movement is particularly strong in Australia, possibly more so than in Britain. We now have feminist publishing houses, particularly the Redress Cooperative, something not heard of before.

Another interesting development is migrant literature, books such as UnAustralian Childhood. In line with this we are beginning to see ethnic bilingual publishing - and a change of practice to support this when the Board funded the publication Outrider. We will, presumably, have to wait for a second generation of Asian writers, but we also have Australian writers looking outward - Koch, D'Alpuget, Drewe have all set novels in the Asian region.

For the literary editor, the number of small, self-published or collectively published works present a dilemma. The chance of buying these books in shops is small for the readers, which leads to reader complaints - and the myth, used as an excuse by the retailers, sometimes, that the Herald reviews unavailable books.

Australians, in fact, spend more on books per head than the British, despite our hedonistic sun and surf society. Imports are being displaced by locally published books. Some of this is attributable to the production of books appropriate to the coming 1988 Bicentennial celebrations, as in the number of Beautiful Australia books on the market.

There is also a discernible shift of focus in Australian writing. Young writers, on the whole, are abandoning 'outbackery' for urban vignettes. Yet Paterson and Lawson are still moneyspinners. There appears to be a generation gap among Australian readers. Paterson, Bill Peach's Explorers and the like appeal to older readers, while the young are preoccupied with picaresque, low life novels on the American model, works by writers such as David Foster and Robert Drewe. Body Surfers sold 40,000 copies in twelve months. We are finally writing about a real Australian experience, not a manufactured one. Australian writers are becoming comfortable with urban dwellers and the coast as they were with the outback.

There is also a new preoccupation with politics. The success of the Hawke biographies is part of this, and also the the impact of Hawke's personality. We are now being provided with material like David Marr's book on the Ivanov affair and Peter Howson's diaries.

Becoming a literary editor can be a quick way to make enemies and lose friends. Margaret explained that it becomes very difficult to publish excruciating reviews of work one personally admires or by a person who is also a friend. It is difficult to remain honest. There is also the question of what the literary pages should be. Is the main interest for the reader in the books or the reviewers? Should the emphasis be down-to-earth or literary? What degree of space should be kept for local books? Should the Herald be showing the world scene?

Publishers in Australia are sometimes lax in providing books which are suitable for our pages. They are also reluctant at times to import books of interest to Australian readers. Fine American and British books are sometimes left unreviewed. There is still a tyranny of distance which disadvantages Australian readers.

Book reviews are also read for pleasure. It is difficult to find good reviewers. The Herald likes to encourage young reviewers, not middle-aged establishment. They try not to discourage the more radical - who make the pages livelier - and the Herald is more radical in itself than it used to be.

Finally, an editor cannot fail to notice what appears to be a national obsession - the growth area of poetry, not only by established poets, but by the public at large. Undeterred by standards of any sort, people send in poems on every imaginable theme, from politics to Anzac Day,