



THE EDITORS

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

The next meeting, the A.G.M., will be held at the Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre on Wednesday 4 April, at 6.30 pm.

Reports will be presented, office bearers for 1984-85 elected (nomination forms enclosed with this newsletter), and general business conducted.

Please contact Monica Ardill on 406.4288 by Monday 2 April if you are attending.

LAST MEETING

A well-attended meeting, and why not? Thomas Keneally was in fine form.

To introduce his theme, Editors I Have Known, Thomas Keneally, with the experience of fifteen published novels, suggested that writers think about publishers the way feminists think about men:

'They are similar spiritual states,' he claimed. 'The editors are remembered with affection as typically also ensnared in the publishers' plot to exploit the writer'.

His first real editor was John Abernathy, 'an enthusiastic boy who cut his teeth with Viking in New York. I met him when he worked for Angus & Robertson at a time when they were still an old family firm, with editors of the calibre of Tony Barker, Barbara Ker Wilson, Douglas Stewart and Beatrice Davis.'

Abernathy epitomised the most desirable sort of editor - a man with a passionate regard for letters, and an attitude of forgiveness to writers when they are being difficult. Writers don't like being treated in a cavalier fashion.

Abernathy was at his best at the dinner table, where he had his own style as a raconteur. He told good stories (Keneally is convinced that every editor is a short story writer at heart), measured his drinking to a 'high Celtic sense of the divinity of booze', and loved to read and read well

a favourite prose passage or poem between courses.

'The ambience of writing was made easier by his enthusiasm. Equally important, he had a fine copy editor's eye and a good technical sense.'

'John Abernathy was a brilliant editor, remembered by everyone because in those days A & R published everyone. His was a very important role. Inevitably, editors are halfway between the publisher and the writer.'

And writers often feel the insensitivity of the publisher's scape-goating or patronage 'In feminist terms, it is the assumption that women will do the ironing and lower the lavatory seat. The equivalent reality to writers is to be told, if you write a bum book, "You didn't sell", and if you are a success, "We sold you" - when in fact it is the publisher who controls the marketing machine.'

In New York, Keneally was published by Harcourt Brace & Jovanovich. There the author's rights were preserved by editor Tony Godwin. Keneally had been poached from Viking (where his experience, he says, had parallels with the other feminine complaint 'they only want you till they've got you'). Godwin could control the investor, Jovanovich, a man who took a lot of notice of accountants. Unfortunately Godwin died from a condition which seems to rival alcoholism in Keneally's experience of editors and writers - asthma. At his funeral, his sister spoke of his compensation for the asthma which woke him to work in the early hours of the morning. As a test of trust and courage, he used to take her children, their eyes closed, on a walk to the edge of a cliff. This, too, reminded Keneally of the author/editor relationship.

Godwin's death, unfortunately, liberated Jovanovich and the accountants on a spree from which Harcourt Brace never recovered. He had a good relationship with the new editor, whose secret passion was horseracing (he honeymooned at the Saratoga races). He knew about Phar Lap and Kingston Town when many Americans were still confusing Australia with Austria. He now works for Athenaeum.

Clearly the new editor did not effectively shield writers from the new and ruthless ways of Jovanovich and the accountants. One particularly mad Australian author was inspired to hire a plane and attempt assassination of the editorial department through

the plate glass skyscraper windows. He was deterred by New York police, and so one publisher escaped what Keneally describes, with some sense of disappointment, as 'a Byzantine death' - and which he used for a scene in a later novel.

Life is rarely so dangerous in the publishing world, but Keneally would not like the point to be lost:

'There was too much commercial stress in Harcourt Brace. There are judgements you can make about toothpaste which you simply cannot apply to books.'

In London, Keneally dealt with the Oxbridge educated editor, himself a formidable biographer, with an intimidating background of diplomatic experience as well as family connections. He occasionally corrected Keneally's carefully researched scenarios by reference to the famous involved at the time, now on his dinner party circuit.

Ion Truon edited the English edition of Schindler's Ark. A former London Times literary editor, Keneally found that he combined 'the qualities of a working journalist with a passion for letters. The experience of the Booker Prize bonded us.'

It also gave Keneally new insight into what he calls 'the forgivable ways of editors' when he saw the editor's local newspaper headline: 'Truon's Triumph'. It was, however, a formidable manuscript to edit - full of Slavic and German names, which required a fine eye for copy as well as a sure technical and artistic sense. 'It was a certain forgivable vanity'.

Over in air-conditioned New York, the American edition began with the famous editor, Nan Taleese, long-suffering wife of Gay Taleese (author of Thy Neighbour's Wife). Nan then moved to another house, and two months later on to Simon Schuster, where she has the strength of character to hold off the company one of whose directors writes copy for the National Gun Association.

His new editor was Patricia Solomon. Her distinction, apart from editing, appears to be her marriage to Anwar Solomon (known as 'the Sheikh') manager of the restaurant chain of a large multinational conglomerate.

'New York editors,' Keneally observed 'seemed to work everywhere at a fast rate, according to a system of seduction.'

Editors also have their professional problems. Keneally quoted Fay Weldon's speech at the Booker Prize last year, when she offended publishers with indications of how and why editors (as well as authors) are exploited. The main complaint, of course, is that they are underpaid - television is now too strong a rival for the great editors to stay with the printed word. She also objected to the use of the editor as the hatchet person in publishing.

Keneally fears that in publishing, the sort of domination by accountants which has afflicted the artist in the popular media will become a trend, as it was at Harcourt Brace. He quoted a horror story from Fred Schepisi on the extent to which Americans try to plan the arts. Four cuttings of one movie were shown to audiences of teenagers bussed to a cinema equipped with buttons to be pressed when bored, or when they 'fancied' an actress, etc. - based on an analysis of their responses, a final version was edited.

He takes heart from the experience of Chariots of Fire which was released on the 'dump' market of cinemas, and rose to prominence by its own brilliance.

'A lot of corporate dominance has only shown they can't dominate art', he ended optimistically, 'editors and writers have a lot of surprises in store.'