

November 27th 2008

Dear Sir/Ms,

As an internationally-published Australian author, I'm concerned at the possibility of change in the current importation and copyright regulations for books.

The current regulations have seen the Australian book industry – writers, publishers and independent booksellers – blossom within my lifetime from tiny (dominated by imported authors and books, and by overseas publishers) to its present healthy, vibrant and world-class status. The regulations have been worked out and modified over the years to produce the best outcome for the producers as well as buyers of books. Why alter something that's working so well, and run the very real risk of the destruction of the Australian book industry?

We represent a huge success story, with a keen and loyal readership base both here and overseas, and an extraordinarily high representation in international literary awards and honours.

Changes to the current regulations to erode our copyright territories will have a devastating impact. Because of our small population, few Australian writers – even well-known and celebrated ones - make anything more than an extremely modest income from sales. Anything that will further reduce our income will see many of us forced to stop writing. At best, we will be forced to tailor our writing only to what overseas publishers and readers will buy, since our Australian publishers would be in decline.

This, however, is what will happen if the regulations are changed. Overseas editions of our books freely available here would erode our income in a number of ways. On those books we will either get "export royalties" (usually 5% or 6% rather than 10% or 12%, and frequently on receipts rather than on RRP), or no royalties at all (if they're declared "remainders" by the overseas publishers). In addition, policing the difference between remainders and current stock will be effectively impossible, so there will be no way of writers knowing what we are entitled to or asserting our rights as creators.

Booksellers may charge less on these books than on Australian editions – or they might not. There is absolutely no guarantee that the customer will end up paying less.

However, it can be guaranteed that Australian authors and Australian publishers will be seriously and often fatally damaged.

Other countries with a market here do not intend to dismantle territorial copyright protection for their own authors and publishers. The UK and the US do not allow parallel importation. No doubt they would be delighted if we decided unilaterally to do so.

If we were producing socks or toasters the decline of a local industry would be of no importance except to the individuals involved. But if Australian writers can't afford to go on writing (and Australian publishers can't afford to publish us) then there will be many fewer books reflecting our unique Australian experience.

This has the knock-on effect that there will also be fewer films reflecting our nation, as many Australian films are based on books (including two of my own, with options on two more). Schools will have a narrower base of books with which to explore Australian life. Overseas culture, language, history and values – especially from the US – will dominate our bookshelves as they now dominate our screens.

It's obviously important for the vitality of our nation to be able to read about our own history, our people, our issues, in books written by Australians primarily for Australians. Without that conversation with ourselves we'd be an impoverished and stunted society.

Australian writers are disproportionately represented in international prizes such as the Man Booker, the Commonwealth Prize, the IMPAC Dublin Award, the Orange Prize and others. These are the Olympics of the literary world. Our writers will stop appearing in those lists if our income is eroded and our publishing options restricted.

The idea that direct subsidies, grants etc will compensate for this damage is unrealistic and impracticable. What we have with the current regulations is a finely-tuned mechanism in which the strengths of a market economy can operate, but with enough protection to balance our small size and vulnerability in the global marketplace. Changes to those regulations will not ensure cheaper books - booksellers, like all businesses, will always charge as much as the market will bear - but for the sake of that illusion, one of Australia's healthiest industries - both export and domestic - will wither. This will be contrary to the well-being and longterm interest of the Australian community as a whole.

I urge you not to destroy this proven success story.

Yours faithfully

Kate Grenville

author of
The Lieutenant
The Secret River
The Idea of Perfection
Dark Places
Joan Makes History
Dreamhouse
Lilian's Story
Bearded Ladies
The Writing Book
Making Stories
Writing from Start to Finish
Searching for the Secret River.