

Submission to the Parallel Importation of Books Productivity Commission.

Dear Commission,

I have been working as an Australian author and illustrator for twelve years, and am writing in support of upholding restrictions on parallel importation.

As a creator of illustrated books and graphic novels, I am successfully published both locally and overseas; territories include US, Canada, UK, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Scandinavia, Korea, Taiwan and Japan, and the recipient of multiple international awards for illustrated literature. My income as a freelance creator is largely dependent on royalties from titles published both in Australia and internationally, although I consider Australian readers my primary audience, and prefer working within a Melbourne-based publishing community. All of my work is first published in Australia. I also regularly present talks and workshops as a writer/artist for students, teachers and the general public: about 80% of this is locally based.

Royalties

Australian book sales account for the larger slice of the income that allows me to continue producing such work. Foreign editions are usually sublicensed, such that my royalty percentages here are significantly reduced, often negligible; divided between two or more publishers, as well as intervening agents. They are also often derived from cheaper editions with poorer production values.

Reproduction Quality

The reproduction of images is notably more problematic than that of text; the quality of a reader's experience of a work, even appreciation of content, can be significantly reduced in a picture book or graphic novel that is not properly proofed, colour corrected or press-checked. Overseas editions are usually more difficult to control, as it is rarely a condition of contracts, especially where sublicensed (and there is no close relationship with an editor): in many cases, foreign editions (UK, Canada, US) are inferior to editions first published locally, with much care and attention. I would not wish them to compete with 'original' versions produced here.

Australian YA Picture Books

Australian picture books are quite uniquely placed in the international market, especially the english-language picture book market. They are often praised by overseas critics and academics for their diversity of style and subject, boldness of approach and occasional controversy due to challenging subject matter: by comparison, the picture book market in the US and UK are generally quite conservative, as any visitor to an international children's book fair (such as Bologna) can confirm.

Australian creators are also at the forefront of young-adult illustrated fiction, largely through the support of local editors who are willing to take creative risks, and over years have developed a supportive network of formal and informal friendships. Many Australian works that have been ground-breaking locally, best-selling and internationally award-winning would probably not have been initially published by a UK or US publisher, being deemed 'too difficult' for the commercial market and a narrow perception of audience expectation, where originality is undervalued. I continually receive comments from US and UK artists and readers fascinated by the innovative work produced by Australian publishers, and often ask why this is so. I believe it is due to the unique culture and community that has grown around this particular corner of literature.

My own success as an illustrator and author is based largely on a close relationship that began in 1996 with an independent Australian publisher, Lothian Books. Here I had the opportunity to work on projects that I am certain would have been unavailable in a larger international market; unusual, genre-bending illustrated books for older children, dealing with themes such as depression, bureaucracy and war. (I was simultaneously submitting work to overseas publishers, with little interest.) Best-selling and critically acclaimed books such as 'The Rabbits' and 'The Arrival', could not have come about without local nurturing and development - they are first and foremost, to my mind, Australian books rooted in a certain experience of landscape and people.

Emerging Creators

It's worth mentioning that my royalties were barely enough to live on during my first four or five years as a picture book creator, and my supplementary illustration work all came from local trade and educational publishers. Had any of this income been undercut any further, I would most likely have turned away from illustrated literature altogether, choosing more viable areas such as advertising or graphic design, quite reluctantly. (Note also that by the time I was eligible to receive an Australia Council grant, I had to have published several works, so this alternative may not be reliably available to a new creator.) My feeling is that had restrictions on parallel importation been lifted ten years ago, my career as a book illustrator would have been stalled, creatively frustrated, even non-existent. My concern is the affect such a move might have on the new book illustrators as well as those struggling to make their work financially defensible (perhaps the majority).

Moreover, the quality of work produced and published will undoubtedly suffer, in an area of publishing that is already compromised by commercial pressures: Australian readers are the ones who will ultimately have a diminished experience of illustrated literature should copyright restrictions on parallel importation be removed.

- Shaun Tan

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