Thank you for inviting me to meet you a few weeks ago to discuss the realities of being an Australian writer. As you suggested, I'm now making a second submission, consisting of the background notes on my writing career that formed the basis of our conversation, plus a reflection on some of the issues illustrated by that information.

Kate Grenville

Born 1950.

Grew up on British books imported by British publishers – little else was available, especially books for children and young adults.

1966: My father published a novel by Macmillan – a British company with a branch in Australia. Heavily "Anglified" editing, no promotion, low sales: a model of what to expect of being an Australian writer at that time.

1969-1972: did a BA (Hons) in English at Sydney University. No Australian writing on any courses until Honours year, then only a few authors.

1973-1977 : worked as an editor in the film industry, then undergoing a renaissance thanks to the "10BA" tax incentive scheme.

1977-1980: In London and Europe, began to write fiction. Nothing published in the UK, but some short stories published in Australia.

1980-1982: Did a Master's Degree in Creative Writing at the University of Colorado.

1983: Came to see that I was prepared to forego financial security in order to write. Writing in Australia at that time was hardly a "career" but for me it's never been a "hobby" either. Perhaps "vocation" is the word that comes closest: an urge to follow a path that seems worthwhile, even though it may never make you wealthy.

Also saw that I wanted to write about my own place and its issues. Returned to Australia. Saw that a renaissance of Australian writing had taken place and that there were more options for Australian voices to be heard: more independent Australian publishers, many more Australian books and a distinctively Australian literary voice available to read.

Continued to write while patching together an income from part-time work of various kinds.

1984: Published first book, a collection of short stories, with a small Australian publisher (University of Queensland Press). Detailed editing over several months, including many conversations with the editor, helped the stories find their form and voice. No interest from US or UK publishers.

1985: Won Vogel/Australian prize for *Lilian's Story*, published by Allen & Unwin (independent Australian publisher). Many meetings with the editor to improve the manuscript.
US and UK publishers accepted the book a year later, on the condition that I made changes to the text: eg replace "goanna" with "iguana", "ute" with "pickup", "footpath" with "sidewalk". I rewrote text in order to avoid Americanisms while not losing the opportunity to publish (e.g."goanna" became "large lizard" – culturally neutral but not very interesting). Filmed in 1987, Ruth Cracknell & Barry Otto.

Sales modest but encouraging in Australia, virtually non-existent overseas, book remaindered there.

1986: published *Dreamhouse* (UQP), again with in-depth discussion on fine points of narrative development and voice. Australian sales healthy. Filmed (as *Traps,* Jacqueline McKenzie).

With much difficulty, UK and UK publisher found. No promotion, very few sales.

During this time income from royalties extremely modest, supplemented with teaching, reviewing, etc. Over the next several years awarded several grants from the Literature Board of the Australia Council that enabled me to keep writing. Also over the next several years published three books about the writing process in the

hope of generating a steady income: *The Writing Book, Making Stories* (co-written with Sue Woolfe), and *Writing From Start to Finish.*

1988: published *Joan Makes History*, (UQP) commissioned by the Australian Bicentennial Commission – a satirical look at Australian history through the eyes of women. In Australia it was set on school reading-lists and adapted for plays in schools. Many letters from readers, especially school students enjoying another perspective on the usually-solemn business of history.

With great difficulty, UK and US publishers eventually found. Pressure to change vocabulary for overseas readers – overseas promotion and sales virtually nil. Overseas editions remaindered.

1995: Wrote *Dark Places*. While in the UK on other writing business I spoke to several publishers, hoping the personal contact might encourage them to support this book more than previous ones.

One British publisher offered enthusiasm and quality editing. However they refused to split rights, demanding world rights including Australasia. Instead of royalties of 10 or 12% of Recommended Retail Price, I would have earned "export royalties" - only 5 or 6% - on Australian sales (and this may have been on net receipts to the publisher, rather than the RRP – a smaller amount). Since until then virtually all sales of all my books had been in Australia, this would have halved an already meagre income from royalties.

I published with Picador (UK) who were willing to split rights with Picador (Aust) so that I earned full royalties on Australian sales. Won Vance Palmer Prize in Australia. Picador (UK) published a year later with little promotion, low sales.

Continued to make small amounts from royalties, supplementing by teaching Creative Writing. Awarded a "Keating" fellowship from the Australia Council.

2000: Published *The Idea of Perfection*, again with Picador in Australia and the UK.

In Australia the book was received lukewarmly and had indifferent sales. In the UK the book dropped out of sight, with little promotion and poor sales.

To everyone's astonishment, it then won the Orange Prize (one of Britain's most valuable awards). When more copies were finally printed, the book took off both in Australia, the UK and the US. Film rights sold, translations in many languages. In Australia, book on university courses, huge volumes of reader mail.

Discovered that overseas editions of several of my books were being sold in Australia. They were hardbacks but were priced a dollar or two below the price of my Australian paperback editions. On all those hardbacks I earned no royalties (since they were called "remainders", on which royalties are not paid). Because they were attractive to customers it meant no-one was buying the Australian editions, on which I *would* have earned royalties. As an author, I had no way of knowing whether these really were remainders or current stock and no redress, only knew that my already slim income had shrunk further.

Readers who innocently presented these hardbacks to me for signing – unaware of the fact that royalties are a writer's only income, and I was getting none on these - had no idea that they were inadvertently robbing me of my ability to write more books.

Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of this dumping of overseas editions is that those books don't appear in the publisher's records as sales. These invisible sales make the book appear less successful than it really is. In a "bottom-line" climate, a writer's main bargaining-chip is the previous book's sales. If they look unimpressive, the publisher is unlikely to publish the next book.

Winning the Orange Prize had given me a reprieve, but prizes are a lottery and I knew I couldn't count on another stroke of luck like that. After six books, I felt the message was clear: I'd never make a living from my work. I could see I'd be teaching Creative Writing for the rest of my life, and decided to do a Doctorate of Creative Arts in order to equip myself properly for life as a full-time teacher of writing. The subject of my DCA was my convict ancestor, an early settler on the Hawkesbury River, and the main part of the thesis was a "creative work" i.e. a novel based on his story.

2005: Published this novel as *The Secret River* with Text Publishing (a small independent Australian company). Chose Text Publishing because of excellent editing and vigorous promotion of Australian writing.

Editing was a revelation – in a long, thoughtful, collaborative series of discussions the book was refined and I developed enormously as a writer.

Mainly because of the Orange Prize, a British publisher (Canongate) bought all rights other than Australasian at the same time (with earlier books, publishers had always waited until the book was a proven success in Australia before reluctantly agreeing to publish).

Book won many Australian prizes and the Commonwealth Prize and was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize. A best-seller in the UK and Australia, still selling extremely well three years later. Translated into over 20 languages. Film rights sold. Book on many school and university courses. Book formed the basis for a series of paintings by visual artist Gina Bruce.

2006: published *Searching for The Secret River*, a memoir about the research and writing of *The Secret River*. Published by Text in Australia and Canongate in the UK. Excellent sales.

October 2008: Published *The Lieutenant* with Text Publishing in Australia and Canongate in the UK and US. Excellent sales. Several translations immediately, film rights currently under negotiation.

In summary, my first six books of fiction made modest sales, always supplemented by other work and grants. I continued writing because of the satisfaction of being part of the conversation we Australians were having with each other about issues of importance to us. My readership was almost exclusively Australian. I received large volumes of mail from readers, all with the same refrain: that I was talking about our own issues, in our own language, and this was why they valued the books so highly.

However, Australian sales were never going to be large because of population, so I was constantly looking for ways to sell more overseas. This was thwarted at every turn by poor royalty offers, pressure to "de-Australianise" and general indifference to an author from (as they described it) "the end of the world". The books found slow and reluctant overseas publishers, were badly edited and indifferently promoted there and made dismal overseas sales. If they hadn't been first published to some success here they would not have found overseas publishers at all.

Australian publishers were able to offer professional development in the form of extensive and intensive editing. They could also offer a reasonable return on *my* investment of time (i.e. reasonable royalties) because of territorial copyright regulations protecting *their* investment of time in my work. Their strength was my only strength in the marketplace.

The parallel with the protection offered to the Australian film industry is significant.

Winning the Orange Prize was to a great extent a matter of chance, as all such prizes must be, yet it changed everything. My seventh book was extremely successful and at this point the eighth is too.

These last two novels are both books about Australian history which are part of a lively current national dialogue about our history, especially the history shared with indigenous people – a dialogue articulated in the PM's "Apology" earlier this year. They have struck a chord with readers here and they've been the way in which several hundred thousand overseas readers have been introduced to our country. They're one small part of a newly vigorous literary culture that's a world away from the second-hand and timid literary culture in which I grew up, and which now seems a bad dream told by older Australians to disbelieving younger ones.

Looking back at my professional experience, several themes emerge:

1. A best-selling, internationally successful writer can spend the first twenty years of his or her writing career as a relative failure in the market.

What enables us to spend those twenty years fruitfully (ie developing our writing to the point where it *does* have market value) is support by people willing to gamble that, in the end, they will make a profit from our work. This is a long-term high-risk investment. At the beginning of most writers' careers it's not at all

obvious which ones are going to be the successful ones – unlike other products where the advantage of one product or service over another is more immediately apparent.

Where does that investment come from?

- In theory it could come from overseas publishers. In reality it usually doesn't. With a few notable exceptions, Australian writing is seen overseas as a small, niche and flavour-of-the-month commodity – exotic and quaint but of no real long-term significance, and consequently unlikely ever to make serious money.

- It might come from the Australian branches of multi-national publishers. They need a constant supply of developing Australian writers to support their own businesses, so to some extent they are willing to take that risk.

But in the end they're answerable to their parent companies who will want to limit that risk as much as possible. The way to limit that risk is to privilege certain kinds of fiction (the reliable sellers: crime, romance, chick-lit etc) over others ("literary" fiction, poetry etc) in which the risk factor is much greater, and to cut budgets where possible, especially in editorial support.

- It might come from independent Australian publishers. They're not answerable to any overseas demands so are free to take whatever risks they choose. They can choose to function at a low level for years on end - having other reasons for being in business than purely business ones (eg indigenous presses, poetry publishers, publishers of "literary" fiction). Their motives might be described as philosophical rather than purely gain-based.

Although their impetus might not primarily be profit, they can in fact be profitable because of the long-term investment in writers that they make. With that profit they can then invest in other beginning writers, accepting that not all of them will be successful. Those writers learn from the experience of being published. The pool of writers, and the level of their skill, increases.

On the whole the independent publishers don't publish the kind of mass-market books the multi-nationals are publishing, and their investment in developing writers is protected by the current copyright regulations. These factors together enable them to nurture Australian writers in a way overseas or multinational publishers are less likely to do.

Many of these writers, once they're successful, are then persuaded by the multinationals to leave the small presses that supported them in the beginning. One effect of this is that the multinationals look more successful at nurturing Australian talent than they really are - they cream off the best writers after the independent publishers have helped their professional development through the lean years. To a great extent this disguises the essential work that the independent presses do, and makes their importance less visible.

- Support for beginning writers might come from direct government subsidies and grants. Direct grants to writers present problems of selection – rather than a large pool of publishers, a writer would have just one committee to apply to. That committee could get it wrong. There are issues of lobbying, of small-pond politics, and the fact that talented artists are often bad at arguing their own case effectively. There are issues of supply – government funds will never be enough to support all the writers or books that deserve to be supported, and in any case, such funds would be dependent on the vagaries of government policy and budgets. Also, although writers' grants are essential (especially for early-and mid-career writers), writers – like most people – prefer to earn a living from their own work in the marketplace if they can.

Direct subsidies to publishers have all those problems plus problems of accountability, problems of government interfering too strenuously in what should be an open industry, and potential for manipulation.

2. The story for a developing writer is very different from that of an established one. Developing writers are invisible until they write their successful book, so their story is easy to overlook. But we were all developing writers once, and our years of "failure" are part of the life-cycle of almost every writer. It can be misleading to look only at successful writers.

Beginning writers send their work to publishers, knowing it will be added to the "slush pile" of unsolicited manuscripts. Luck is involved for the manuscript to be read by the eye that sees its potential. The book world abounds in stories of books that were rejected by twenty publishers, only to become a best-seller when the

twenty-first was willing to take a risk on it. The bigger the pool of risk-takers and the greater variety of agendas they bring to manuscripts, the greater is the chance of success.

My experience shows how uninterested overseas publishers are in our work. The more "literary" it is (about ideas; more than simple entertainment), the less interested they are.

If they can be persuaded to publish, it's on unfavourable terms financially (export royalties), there's poor promotion, distorting and indifferent editing (favouring books that fit what British or US readers want to read, and altering the voice, vocabulary and content of the books). There's no sense of taking on a writer for the long haul: if the previous book didn't sell, the next one will be rejected.

Geographical distance means that, with overseas publishers, there's no chance for a proper professional relationship to develop with an Australian writer – editing is done by email, without any face-to-face or even phone contact. There's no way of being part of the network of publishers, agents, reviewers, editors, journalists and broadcasters on which success and professional development depends. With an overseas publisher, the Australian writer works in a vacuum which isn't good for sales, and also isn't good for the kind of informal exchange of ideas that helps to develop the writer's skills. Even if a writer is prepared to write what the overseas market wants, if you're not on the spot you can't do it effectively. Hence the earlier generations of expatriate Australian writers.

For a developing writer in Australia, financial return in the form of royalties is usually not a living. Developing writers in effect are willing to subsidise their writing by doing other kinds of paid work, for many years. When overseas publishers offer only export royalties, our own investment in ourselves is undermined, our already marginal returns even further eroded. For many excellent writers (especially those with dependents), such erosion of income and confidence can't be maintained and they abandon writing.

An established writer might have some power to negotiate these pitfalls and get better conditions, but a developing writer has no power whatsoever in that marketplace.

If a writer uses the local branches of an overseas publisher, the problem is less severe, but those local branches are always looking for ways to justify their bottom line to the parent company. What suffers most is editorial support. A rapid turnover of staff and outsourcing of editing to freelancers (rather than in-house editors) means that there's little opportunity for the development of a fruitful relationship between writer and editor. Every book has a different editor and the editorial budget covers only a minimal correcting of errors.

But it's this long-term, developing relationship that turns a writer from a promising beginner into a writer who can reach a wide and varied readership. Without that one-on-one professional relationship, beginning writers stumble in the dark wondering why the last book didn't sell, becoming discouraged, and having no sense of being part of a creative team.

As with overseas publishers, with their local branches the writer is only as good as their last book and while lip-service might be paid to "loyalty" to a writer with an unsuccessful book, the reality is that the publisher will be less likely to take a risk with the next one. Personnel changes and constant restructuring of the multinationals means there's no real sense of long-term commitment to developing writers.

Under the current regulations, independent Australian publishers do take those risks and make those investments of time.

They are experts in the local market and they understand what promotion will be effective in the local marketplace. They have long-term local networks that include booksellers, agents and journalists and help their writers become part of those important career networks, without which the individual writer is fatally isolated. Their staff tend to stay with them for a long time and develop long professional relationships with authors. They are in the publishing business for reasons other than purely financial, so they can reassure the developing writer that, even if sales are small, the work is still worth persisting with.

Above all, they know that what they have to offer writers is a degree of editorial nurturing that no multi-national would dream of providing.
With a multinational publisher, a freelance editor will be paid to do a "light edit" (correcting commas and typos and the more glaring inconsistencies), and may never even speak to the writer, much less discuss larger issues about the book.

My experience with independent publishers is that they are prepared to spend many hours of expensive editorial time with the writer, discussing and arguing and refining in a collaborative way. With *The Secret River*, for example, the editing process took something like six months. Long before we discussed individual sentences, we had many long discussions about the big picture of the book's ideas, structural issues, and character development. Only when those elements were in place did we look at the book page-by-page. We spent literally a full working week on the phone on the first of several intense editorial stages, looking at every page of the manuscript and taking as much time as needed to discuss ways to make it better. (With an earlier book with a multi-national, by contrast, a "style sheet" was posted to me with queries such as: did I wish tea-bag to have a hyphen or not? There was no discussion of the larger picture of the book- characters, structure etc - let alone meaning or wider themes. This was not the fault of the editor, but of the publishers willing to pay only for this superficial edit.) Where most publishers discourage changes once the text is formatted, Text was prepared to put the time and money into several sets of heavily-rewritten page proofs.

It's my view that it's this almost incredible amount of support and input by the publisher that has made *The Secret River* the success it is.

This invisible work not only makes for a better book, but it makes a better writer: it's part of the writer's long journey from showing promise to delivering to the maximum of their potential. For my second book with Text Publishing, the process was streamlined because of all the work we'd done on the earlier book.

This degree of professional development for a writer is unthinkable in my experience of multinationals, much less overseas publishers. It's an enormous investment for the publisher, made possible only because that investment is given some protection by current copyright regulations.

3. There's an important difference between "mass-market" and "literary" fiction - a distinction needs to be made between the two in terms of markets and market protection. Books with wide popular appeal are obviously in a stronger position: they sell enough copies for their authors to make a living, and to give their authors bargaining power with publishers.

Books with a smaller readership are vulnerable and their authors have no bargaining power with publishers. Without some degree of protection and support they will never see the light of day.

Yet these are often the books that reflect what's unique about our culture and that invite us to think about ourselves in new and productive ways. The cultural value of lower-selling books is impossible to quantify. But an Australia without the whole choir of local voices - big and small, highbrow and lowbrow, conventional and innovative – would be an infinitely impoverished nation.

4. Behind the Commission's present enquiry is the issue of the price that Australian readers are paying for books, and whether the existence of a distinctive local book industry is worth paying more for.

Leaving aside the contentious issue of whether, in fact, Australians *do* pay more for our books, my experience suggests that there's a large category of readers who are happy to pay a premium for an experience that can only be got from a local industry. I'm thinking of the boom in reading groups, personal appearances by writers, and literary festivals. (Attendance at the Sydney Writers' Festival, for example, has increased from 63,000 to 84,000 in the last two years.)

It's difficult to quantify this, but here's a small indicator. My latest book has an RRP of $45, but it can be bought in chain bookstores and department stores for $10 or $12 less. In spite of this, readers come in large numbers to personal appearances at literary festivals, in independent bookshops and in libraries where books are sold by independent booksellers. At these events the book is generally sold at full price. In spite of the fact that they must know the book is available more cheaply down the road, large numbers of readers are happy to pay a premium to be part of the personal appearance by the writer, with the chance to ask questions and discuss the book, and be part of a community of readers and writers. In other words, those readers are making a decision based not on the price of the book alone, but some other, less tangible criteria to do with a feeling of involvement with a local literature.

For books such as mine, the willingness of the independent bookseller to "hand-sell" the product is the difference between success and failure (the chains stock my books now that they sell well, but didn't stock them when they sold slowly). Those independent booksellers, too, are making a decision based (at least in part) on something other than raw self-interest in the form of profit.

What this suggests is that the Australian community reaps more benefit – in intangible ways - from a vibrant local industry than it suffers from possibly more expensive books.

5. In the last 20 years, not only have there been more Australian books and publishers, but there is now an educational industry that revolves around a healthy local writing industry. Universities offer courses in Creative Writing, Editing, and Professional Writing and offer higher degrees based on producing literature as well as critiquing it. As things stand, graduates of these courses can expect to make careers in some aspect of publishing. Without a healthy and growing local industry, demand for these professional development courses would shrivel. Many of tomorrow's writers – who get their start in these courses – would fail to develop. Writers who depend on teaching for their livelihoods – and for the satisfaction of earning a living within their professional expertise - would suffer.

Writing is a marginal industry. But unlike other marginal industries that are more efficiently outsourced to China, a nation's books are more than just a consumer commodity: they're part of its social property. Books are treated differently from other products in recognition of this (they become public property 75 years after the death of the maker, and are available free in libraries – this doesn't happen with cars or TVs). This cultural wealth is difficult to quantify, which puts artists at a disadvantage in an argument whose parameters are limited to quantifiable ones. It would be a tragedy, though, for us to return to the culturally impoverished Australia of my childhood.

Thank you for your attention.

Yours sincerely

Kate Grenville