

From Sophie Masson, author

I am a full-time writer who has had nearly fifty books published. My work is published in Australia and in many overseas territories, including the USA, the UK, and several other countries in Europe and Asia. Though my work is extensively published overseas, my main relationships have been with my Australian publishers, and I believe that the proposal to end copyright restrictions and allow the parallel importation of books would spell disaster for those publishers, and thus for my career and ability to earn a living—as well as that of many, indeed, most, Australian writers.

For me, it is very, very important that Australian writers be published primarily by Australian publishers, or at least have the opportunity to do so. First of all, though we have a vigorous and diverse literary culture, Australia is a small country whose interests and concerns and images are not necessarily shared by other cultures, including (and maybe even especially!) other English-speaking ones, especially the USA but also including Britain. It is not easy to persuade foreign publishers to be interested in Australian writers, though our publishers do a sterling job in trying to change their minds, and trade in foreign rights is very important for the viability of Australian publishers' lists. Some genres of literature, more global in feel, may survive—others will not, if Australian publishers are driven to the wall by the unfair dumping of books on our market. Anyone who has ever published a book in the USA, for instance, will know that quite often publishers insist on changes in Australian writers' books to language and image which to them feel foreign—whilst of course no such changes are made to US books published here. The "cultural cringe" is very much a real-life factor, when it comes to books set in Australia, by Australian writers, as far as overseas publishers, especially the USA, are concerned.

Britain, in my experience is different—but though it is less common for writers to be expected to make those changes, the bookselling situation in Britain these days is so dire, with the few companies that control the trade able to dictate whether a book lives or dies even before it comes out, that British publishers have restricted their lists considerably these days, and often Australian writers, especially those who are very distinctively Australian, don't get a look in.

There is also the question of personal contact. Publishing is built on it. And authors, who generally work in solitude, need it. If you never have the opportunity of personal contact with your primary publisher and editor because you live thousands of kilometres away, you will not get the same kind of relationship as someone who does have that opportunity. That is not unfair, it is simply human nature. And Australia is a very long way away, even these days, from any other publishing market. To follow up the opportunities that personal contact with your publisher brings, you need to spend a lot of time, and a lot of money, flying long distances to offices in London or New York or Berlin or Paris or wherever.

Then there are the very different royalty rates for writers--10 percent here, mostly 7.5 percent in the UK and USA. This makes a very large difference in expected incomes from the sale of Australian and foreign-published books, for Australian writers, and makes it harder to earn back your advance, which in turn can lead to the publisher seeing your book as unsuccessful and declining to take on the next.

I do not believe that the argument that ending copyright restrictions would mean cheaper books which in turn would mean more readers holds any water at all. The cheapness argument is utterly simplistic—for instance, it is very very cheap to buy books secondhand, especially in the USA, yet the availability of 50c books and so on does not mean the USA enjoys an avalanche of readers. In fact, the opposite could be true, as some recent studies in reading have pointed out. Indeed, Australia stands out as one of the world's top reading nations, with more people reporting reading for pleasure here than in many other countries, and libraries being very well-used, and a healthy and flourishing bookshop scene, with a mixture of independents, franchise and chain at a level not seen in either Britain or the US—or indeed many other countries.

In my term on the Literature Board of the Australia Council (a term which ended in August 2008), I was exposed to the Books Alive campaign, which through booksellers aims to expand readership in Australia. One of the interesting things I noted was a study of reading habits which had been commissioned for the program. Amongst other things, this study showed that cost was only a minor factor in the willingness or otherwise of prospective readers to purchase books. Most reluctance was about feeling intimidated by bookshops or not knowing what to pick. A flood of cheap foreign-sourced books is not exactly going to solve those sorts of problems, only, it would seem, add to them while creating a rod for the backs of Australian writers and publishers. If cost is to be considered as a factor, a more useful thing would be to present a case to the Federal Government for the elimination of GST on books in Australia, which would have an immediate effect on the price of books.

The proponents of parallel importation may believe that it will benefit booksellers by making cheaper books available. However, I believe it may do this in a way they may not at all like, by opening the doors for many more discount and cheap-style stores to aggressively take over the business and squeeze out diversity of competition, whilst presenting a more limited range of books to the Australian reading public. It is absurd to present online bookselling as a threat to Australian bookselling, at least in its present state. This is of course mainly aimed at Amazon. As a frequent buyer of books in physical bookshops, as well as purchaser of books online, I know that I only ever buy books through Amazon if I cannot obtain them in Australia. If it is a foreign book but published here, I buy it here, because postage and conversion rates are often a factor. I never buy books by Australian writers on Amazon, unless the said book is out of print and only available secondhand. But the vast majority of my new books I buy here, in Australia, patronising franchise, independent and chain bookshops. And I do not

think my case is unique by any means. I believe that if copyright restrictions are lifted, it may in fact become advantageous for Amazon to open an Australian arm—and then bookshops really will feel the pinch.

I think it is fair enough that bookshops complain about the fact foreign online retailers like Amazon do not need to charge GST on their books. But either the industry should lobby the Government to try and impose a GST on foreign-sourced books online, or else, and more satisfactorily because there is not the problem of trying to apply an Australian law to a foreign entity, the industry should lobby for the elimination of the GST on books, as proposed earlier.

The fact that neither the US nor the UK, the two biggest markets in the English-speaking world, have not lifted copyright restrictions on their books or allow parallel importation on this level, should surely give pause for thought. Why should we just trash the hard, solid reality of Australian writers' careers and Australian publishers' viability, for some illusory benefit? It would be a return to the colonial mentality, and the aggressive strip-mining of a rich and flourishing literary culture which would be immensely to the detriment of readers, and Australian culture generally.

Yours sincerely,

Sophie Masson  
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