

## **Productivity Commission Submission – Parallel Importation of Books**

As a regular reviewer of literary fiction and children's books since 1968 I write to express my concern over the proposal to deregulate the flourishing local book industry and allow the parallel importation of books from other English-speaking markets apparently on the grounds that this will make some books cheaper and more rapidly obtainable for some readers.

When I started as a reviewer, fresh out of a university that was fighting over the possible establishment of a course in (shock! horror!) Australian Literature, the cultural cringe was rife, new Australian authors were few and far between and the established Australian voices were published overseas. There was very little Australian genre fiction and Australian children were more at home with the notion of snow at Christmas, whether on sidewalks or county byways, than they were with any representation of beach culture or the suburban "bungalows" in which most of them were living.

In the last 40 years the situation has changed dramatically for the better. Australians of all kinds and ages can find books that reflect themselves and their culture. Australian books, in all genres, published in Australia and reflecting Australian themes, issues, ambience and culture are translated and sold into all parts of the world and Australian books and authors are most respectably represented among the recipients of international awards, from the Man Booker to the prestigious Astrid Lindgren Award recently won by Sonya Hartnett.

The Australian book industry provides not only realistic opportunities for Australian writers to be published and receive an audience but also jobs for a very large number of book-related workers – agents, editors, publishers, publicists and the occasional printer – as well as academics in the burgeoning Creative Writing field: there won't be much point in having Creative Writing courses if the entire publication stage has been wiped out by cheap imports and the not unreasonable reluctance of distant publishers to take a risk on an unknown quantity.

Australian authors depend on the local industry to promote their work in the worldwide English-speaking market: first novels, like Toni Jordan's recent *Addition*, are picked up by overseas publishers on the basis of their initial success at home. If there is no viable local publishing there is very little way for an author to make any impact on overseas publishers – and even less opportunity for them to retain the cultural integrity of their work if it is picked up.

For established authors parallel importation will almost certainly mean that US/UK versions of their books – often with changed titles, tweaked vocabulary and occasionally even changed endings – will be dumped on the Australian market as remaindered stock for which they will receive no royalties.

The 30/90 rule which came in in the 1990s has given us the best of both worlds, protecting the local producer while reducing the waiting time for overseas books for the consumer. Experience in Canada and New Zealand post deregulation where previously flourishing book industries are now in decline should be accepted as cautionary: this is not a route to follow. Britain and America with their far larger

book-buying populations obviously have no intention of opening their markets to parallel exportation by us – I wonder why not?

The very fact that you yourselves are apparently proposing the possibility of subsidies to make up the lost earnings of authors suggests that you realise that a move to parallel importation will be seriously deleterious to the industry and will compromise the viability of practitioners. A move from a flourishing, if protected industry back to the support of local culture through handouts seems a very retrograde step indeed. If the aim of the Productivity Commission is to make books more affordable for Australian families you could consider removing the GST on books. This would result in guaranteed lower prices, while the lower prices won through parallel importation may well last only as long as the fleeting parity between Australian and relevant overseas currencies.

Thank you for the opportunity to express my concern on this very important issue.

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Book reviewer