

My name is Peter Carey. I am the author of two short story collections and ten novels. My writing life has been made possible by the Australian publishers who accepted my work when it was rejected in London and New York, who believed in a literature that would define Australia for Australians and represent us to the world. All my novels, including the two that went on to win the Booker Prize, were first published in Australia by an Australian publisher.

I am now read in approximately twenty five languages (sometimes more, sometimes less) only because of an autonomous Australian publishing market and industry.

Australia was not always thus.

Early mercantile life in Australia was dominated by importers, distributors and retailers. As we all know the habits of foundation never do quite vanish. To anyone still thinking in this colonial way, there will be nothing strange about the present proposal to eliminate territorial copyright and with it the discrete Australian market.

What matters, if you are a colonial trader, is that you get the goods cheaper, and you do not weigh, not for a second, the damage to any local culture. If you are a true colonial you will not imagine your colony might even have a culture. You would assume that any indigenous books, for instance, would be inferior to those produced in that faraway place you call 'home'.

So if, as a result of parallel importation, Australian publishers have their roles reduced to that of distributor in a global corporate chain, that will seem the natural order of things. When culture has no value, a lot of weird things start looking sensible.

Perhaps not everyone has noticed how many Australian writers there are, or how they represent us to the world beyond ourselves. Perhaps the people who read Excel sheet are a different cast to those who read literature. They may not be aware that Australian writers get more column inches in the United States than even the most craven of our Prime Ministers. These Australian writers, who are naturally not noticed by those who do not read literature, represent us as a sophisticated nation in every corner of the world. In the years when our French ambassador could not speak French our Australian writers were getting front page reviews in Figaro, Le Monde, Liberation.

So what sort of future is the colonial mind imagining? If we throw our copyright away, our writers will no longer be able to rely on indigenous support. The mercantile advantages of this can be argued, although not by me. However the imagined gain on the excel sheet can in no way compensate the long term devastation of such cultural ‘self suicide’ (an ugly tautology but as this is an American expression we may, in some parallel future, have to learn to live with .)

In the current international climate where both publishers and retailers are in crisis, when executives are questioning the business models that seemed so attractive in the late twentieth century, parallel importation introduces Australia to a complicated and dangerous game. This is no longer a simple colonial equation. Borders and Barnes and Noble are closing stores in the United States. The international publishing corporations (that is, the owners of most “Australian” publishers) are in crisis. Most of the great individualistic publishing figures are dead and gone. The new executives, newly arrived in publishing from finance or ‘content control entities’, have one abiding interest in literature -- it is their product. Their job is to save their corporation. When Australia obligingly donates its market to their possible balance sheet, they will take notice, although we can be sure that they will not ask themselves, *how can we give those folks down under cheaper books?* It is more likely to be – how can we sew this market up?

On this January day in 2009 we still have territorial copyright. We have a distinct market. And even if our publishing houses are, for the most part, owned by people who do not know who Henry Lawson is, our local publishers are like us ---Australian. Their global bosses may let Patrick White go out of print in America. But to an Australian publisher this is a national heritage.

Even as they fly back and forth reporting to London and New York, Australian publishers are aware of the cultural importance of their work at home. They know this “market” has a different character, a different history, a different language and they fight daily and passionately to make sure a unique literature can be born and breathe here, even in an age of value-free globalisation.

As long as we have a territorial copyright our publishers have a commercial argument to support Australian literature. They will battle for the sake of our readers and

our writers, even if their owners have no personal commitment to the strange loves and needs of Australian readers, or the cultural integrity and future of the Australian nation.

Take copyright away from them, and they no longer have a commercial leg to stand on.

And then?

Then the global companies will decide that their Australian offices will be much more profitable as distributors of product than publishers of books. If this sounds creepily colonial, it is because it is.

Perhaps this even seems exciting, but is worth reminding ourselves that when you play the global game you are playing with professionals. If there is a global market in the English language no-one wants to bleed to death in a cost-cutting war. The efficient publisher therefore signs up the best-selling writers with international contracts. Once this is done there will be no competition between the US and Australia and Britain to provide product.

And the writers will sign these global contracts— they will have no other option. Imagine the next John Grisham. Parallel importation eliminates his discrete Australian market, Once he could have sold it. Now he won't be able to. If he wishes to regain what has been stolen, he can only sign up internationally.

And of course the same applies to all those Australian writers who publish internationally. There are a LOT of them. If they have supported Australian publishers all their lives, they will now have to re-think who they sign with next time. .

As for the coming generation of Australian writers, you will be starved. The generation after will be killed before it is even born.

And the Australian subsidiaries of international publishers? I'm sorry. I can't see what they have done to be punished, to be decimated, to have their editorial staff reduced to nothing, to become marketers and publicists for Paris Hilton.

But will the Paris Hilton book be cheaper?

Perhaps. But why would a global corporation need to cut its profits if it controlled all the prices in all the English speaking world? Or should we introduce a global retailer into the equation, a new species that can swim in acid, who can devour our indigenous retailers, scare the global publishers to death, mug them, bash them, rob them blind? Or

should we put a very, very high value on ourselves and who we are? After all, we do already have a lot to be ashamed of in our history. We already have enough to rectify, to compensate, to restore. Let us not add the abandonment of a unique literary culture to this humiliating list.