

TO: the Members of the Commission

From: Jennifer Byrne

16 April 2009

As presenter of a national programme which focuses on books and reading, I regard myself as an outsider in this debate. Like the productivity commission, I believe good books should be available to the public at the lowest reasonable price. But the dramatic winding back of Australian territorial copyright strikes me as the bluntest, least constructive weapon to achieve this.

This should not be a discussion over the “cheapness” of a product, but its quality, quantity, character – and most important, given we are talking about books here, its sustainability.

Publishing is not a fat industry. Authors struggle to get their work published, and the vast majority earn way below the basic wage. Editors work for some \$45,000 a year. Publishers do not smoke cigars. I have been enormously excited and heartened to see the evolution of Australian publishing – and in recent years, the springing up of small presses such as Text and Hardie Grant, Scribe and Giramondo, to name but a few. The simple fact is: the restriction of Australian territorial copyright threatens the survival of this country’s smaller presses, and the courage and vigour of the larger houses. It is so difficult, and takes so long, to produce a winner in Australian publishing, and local literary books have a tragically short life on our shelves. To make that hard road harder by allowing overseas publishers – who dominated this industry for so long – dump product into our market strikes me as an exceedingly odd way of representing the interests of the Australian consumer.

They don’t only want cheap. They want a vivid, original, creative industry with a cultural resonance. Which talks to them, about them.

And as one of those consumers, I believe authors deserve their copyright. It is, in the end, all they have. It is what makes it possible to earn the dignity of their living – even a frugal one. If you have any doubt this is relevant to the issue, perhaps you should visit one of those bulk book barns where overseas hardbacks are stacked like tomatoes at \$3 a pop.

That could be our future.

Jennifer Byrne

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