

***Editors in Conversation 2* launch at the 4th National Editors Conference**

9 October 2009

Thank you to the Victorian Society for allowing me the pleasure of introducing *Editors in Conversation 2* to you.

It's a book of two parts. The first part recognizes eight Society of Editors Honorary Life Members; the second part recounts one editor's involvement in a project that most of us would die for.

I'll deal with Part One first and I'll start with an act of ageism. (It's OK – I've passed the eligibility test.)

When I leafed through Part One of *Editors in Conversation* I was bowled over by the depth and breadth of experience that was crammed into 126 pages. How could this be? Well, I thought, maybe it was because there were so many years crammed into the lives of these eight interviewees. When I totaled their ages, the answer came to 549 years, which means an average age of just under 70. Even if we start the calculation from age 18, it still comes to roughly 400 years of working experience. So, if you're as intelligent, enterprising and charming as these eight Honorary Life Members reveal themselves to be, you can achieve an amazing number of things in 400 years.

In the dining-out fashion of the times, here's a degustation menu of the many and varied things that these people have encountered over those years – and here's a warning: the name-dropping is unavoidable!

This was Ruth Dixon, an Australian working in London.

In 1964, I ... farewelled Longmans, and went to ... Faber & Faber. Being a much smaller company I was thrown in head first.... And on some days, a certain immaculately dressed TS Eliot would enter the front door and ascend to his office.

Or this from Jackie Yowell.

Oh, how could I forget Gough Whitlam's *The Truth of the Matter* [Penguin, 1979] ... working closely with a giant of a man whose erudition was terrifying – and whose rage could be terrifying too, though he didn't maintain it for long!

Basil Walby and Nick Hudson each changed career – a very common experience in the 80s.

Basil: Well, we had one of our frequent palace revolutions in CSIRO and they brought in a soap salesman to run the information publishing library operations ... My job disappeared, in fact. There were three editors-in-chief in CSIRO from the word go, and I was the third and last. There's never been one since. They put in a manager.

Nick Hudson: My experience was similar, but it wasn't a palace revolution. The parent company was taken over, and they brought in this very dour individual with extraordinarily limited intelligence. I think he was fearful that I would remain loyal to the old regime ... So he dismissed me.

Or this from Barbara Ker Wilson, Hon Life Member twice over, in NSW and Queensland.

Oh, people usually say I discovered *Paddington Bear* and *Captain Pugwash* but that was ages ago. At The Bodley Head I helped to complete the last of the CS Lewis *Narnia* series... When *The Last Battle* was awarded the Carnegie Medal, Professor Lewis asked me to accept the medal on his behalf, and sent me a marvellous speech to read out. I practised it for days.

Janette Whelan talked of her work on the committee for Australian Standards for Editing Practice.

Hard work, but it was the finest committee I have ever been involved with. We all got on exceedingly well. Nobody was precious about her work. That was the marvellous thing about working with eight women.

Teresa Pitt tells of her encounter with Barry Humphries.

The most fun I ever had working with an author was when I worked with Barry Humphries to produce the Sandy Stone book.... Barry kept coming up with funny stories, hysterically witty comments, and jokes and puns. I have to say that was the greatest fun...

As a last taster, here's Colin Jevons being somewhat provocative.

...when I left the publishing industry ... as a result of an involuntary career change, I discovered somewhat to my surprise that what I'd been doing all this time ... was actually marketing. ... I think the commercial reason for employing an editor is to sell more books. ... it's actually no different philosophically from some chemist in the Coca-Cola laboratory figuring out how to make Coke even sweeter or whatever.

Out of these few tastings one can pull any number of themes but I'll touch on a few that strike me as interesting and important.

1 Becoming an editor

This is always fascinating. For most the passion began very young, often through family experience and four out of eight had edited a school magazine. What possibly differentiates their generation from the emerging one is the experience of becoming an editor. Back then you got a toehold in the door of a publishing firm and gained knowledge and experience by osmosis, through observation, mentoring and just doing it. I suppose this sink or swim approach means that some drowned on the way and we only know the champion swimmers. But what a training it was – hands-on, multi-faceted and comprehensive. For many of the interviewees, the current notion of formal accreditation is a good one but there is some fear that the editing horse has already bolted from the publishing stable because the bottom line doesn't allow the luxury of editing time; it's marketing that controls the purse strings. However, many of these editors have learned through involuntary separation that being self-employed has advantages. If publishing houses have cut their internal staff, they will surely still need to employ some freelancers. The new generation of aspiring freelancers will have to make it their business to pursue excellence through university and TAFE courses, and somehow develop the experience, knowledge and skills that will equip them to pass the exam.

2 The good old days

It was inevitable that the good old days were given a good run. I did a count and found 18 references to 'fun' – great fun, tremendous fun, such fun, etc. This reflects the cooperative and usually very democratic nature of the major publishing houses, in the UK and Australia, and the fact that they valued creative people.

It was always first-name terms regardless of who you were. There was no humbug. That's what I really liked about the 'good old days'. Janette Whelan

The other fond memory of this time, which came to an end in roughly the mid-80s, was that these editors were involved in the whole publishing process, from the first commission to seeing the publication come off the press. They compared this with today, where it's very few lucky editors who can take responsibility or even observe a publication from the kernel of an idea through to its birth. Marketing runs the publishing company and the editor is sitting in freelance isolation.

3 Technological revolution – good or bad?

The paradox of the technological revolution was another theme for discussion.

I get a little tired of people who think the computer is the be-all and end-all – a substitute for clear thinking and solid knowledge of the English language. Janette Whelan

However, no-one disputed that editing, design and typesetting are much easier to do these days. Hot metal was exciting, preparing copy for the printer was exacting, but things now allow for so much more flexibility. It's just that too often the wrong people are given this miraculous publishing tool and they have no guidelines for its use. One solution? Editors must push their professional barrow more vigorously.

4 Working for the Society of Editors – a common thread

All eight of these Honorary Life Members of their state society are clearly esteemed by their peers and recognized for the contribution they have made to setting up their society, to providing training and mentoring in all aspects of editing and publishing, and to providing companionship and support to hundreds of editors, young and old, over the decades. They all expressed great pride in being singled out for the HLM honor and while acknowledging the effort and time they have devoted to the cause, that word kept on appearing – *it was great fun!*

Now for Part 2 – Three books and a film is the transcript of a presentation made to the Victorian Society of Editors by former Penguin publisher Julie Watts. Julie tells the story of the evolution of *Mao's Last Dancer* - the book, the young readers' book (condensed by Barbara Ker Wilson) and the children's picture book, all based on the autobiography of Li Cunxin. The film version directed by Bruce Beresford premiered recently and is now screening in Australian cinemas. Julie Watts, recipient of the Dromkeen Medal and the Pixie O'Harris award for her services to children's literature, gives a fascinating account of working with Li on a manuscript that grew and grew, eventually to 680,000 words. She says many warm things about Penguin's senior editor, Suzanne Wilson, who did painstaking background research and worked with Li to cut the words down to 150,000. This was a logistical nightmare – 'what to do with 680,000 words every one of which we loved!'

Her account emphasizes the importance of the relationship between publisher, author, editor and designer.

We were a dream team, with a shared vision, and we all worked *so* hard to make it happen, to ensure that others would love Li's story as much as we did.

Make sure you read Julie's story – it's truly inspirational.

In this brief time I can only skate across the surface of this engaging collection of conversations. I encourage you to delve deeper and take inspiration from a previous generation of thinkers and achievers in the world of publishing. As I launch *Editors in Conversation 2*, I congratulate all those involved in its development – the contributors and interviewers, and the general editors from the Society of Editors Victoria – Kerry Biram, Diane Brown, Jenny Craig and Wendy Owen.

Pamela Ball
Honorary Life Member
Society of Editors (SA)