

History Forum: My Story

[Presented at the State Library, NSW 2001]

Thank you for the invitation to be part of today's forum. As introduced, I am Chair of the Australian Society of Authors and a prolific writer of fiction for young people of all ages. I was, however invited to speak on the particular subject, as I am the author of one of the latest works published under the series title of My Story, by Scholastic Australia, the Australian arm of the international company Scholastic.

The tale behind the series, My Story, is an interesting one and worth telling in the context of some general criticism of publishers and their decision-making processes especially where History is concerned. The original series of this kind is the series written in America, about moments in American history, called Dear America. These are diaries, written by fictitious American girls, overwhelmingly marketed to girls, collector's items. A TV series has spun off from that. Then the British arm of the company tried the idea. Same story, I think, called ...? . but, I think no TV series. At first Scholastic Australia passed on the idea of the series. They'd seen the American books and, I think quite rightly, felt that would not appeal in the Australian market.

But. Then they heard that the British wanted to publish stories of Australian history to be written wait for it - by British writers! To their credit, Scholastic Australia could not allow this to happen. They reasoned that if our story was to be told then it had to be told by us and they approached Australian fiction writers, many of whom I might add have Honours degrees and higher in history to see if they were interested in pursuing the idea here.

The deal was not unusual for a work of fiction - \$5,000 advance, approx 40,000 words and a 10% royalty.

They wanted to know the period you were interested in writing about only so they didn't end up with the first 3 books set in the Gold Rush or the aftermath of the First World War, but beyond that there was total editorial freedom. No one was saying what was to be published and what wasn't. It was the usual Trade publishing deal send me a mss and if it's good enough, if we think it will sell, we'll publish. There are no dictates of curriculum/syllabus.

The first 4 books were set in the periods of: The Second Fleet, The Eureka Stockade, The Turn of the Century 1900 and the Sixties with the Anti War Movement and the rise of the Women's Movement. Since then a number of others have been published My own work set at the time of the Rum Rebellion, a work in the voice of a stolen child in the nineteen thirties, a book on the escape of the Fenians on the Catulpa, from Fremantle and another set in 1919 after WW1 and during the influenza epidemic. I understand there are books at production stage dealing with the Bombing of Darwin and the voyage of La Perouse.

The approach was always that of a fiction publisher. Does the book work as a piece of fiction, not as a history textbook? I don't know to what extent the publishers validated aspects of the interpretation of the historical events in the books, I do know that in my own case and in the case of those other writers I have spoken to the research was thorough and meticulous, dealing with both primary and secondary sources.

I have been around the children's literature scene for almost twenty years and it has been well known that historical fiction doesn't sell. Well it does. In the case of this particular series, three of the first four are now in their fourth printing and the fourth is in its third. That, as anyone around fiction publishing can vouch, is an amazing result. One of those titles has also sold into the English market - exporting Australian historical fiction back to the British is not a bad achievement.

One comment worth making is that the American series is unquestionably a 'girls' series. The books contain only female protagonists, they are designed with a young female readership in mind and that certainly is the demographic that is buying or should I say collecting them. Interestingly since I first drafted this paper a week ago I have contacted the publisher and discovered that the American company has brought out a boy series *My Name is America*. Interesting rigid gender division. What is the bet that the girls are reading both but the boys are only reading the boys series?

The Australian books on the other hand are not focused that way. There are a number of boy protagonists with more to come. The design, although clearly a 'series' is not cloning but font and colour vary to suit the particular time. Most interesting of all, these books do not present a single, conservative national view. The interpretations of events are often on the more radical end of a spectrum certainly no editorial changes were asked for when in one diary contained affectionate references to Karl Marx, nor when another book was written in the voice of a stolen child. The commissioning editor sought out an indigenous writer to create such a work. In fact, the original editor of the series has said that he was struck by how frequently the mss that turned up on his desk gave voice to those whose voices had not been heard before.

When invited to contribute to the *My Story* series, I had a number of considerations. I wanted a story that could be read on a number of levels a dramatic tale with plenty of action but one that had meaning that resonated in contemporary Australia. I wanted real, passionate and powerful characters and I needed to be confident that there would be a good supply of research ma

The Rum Rebellion suited my purposes. In 1808 the New South Wales Rum Corps, the military presence in the Colony, marched on Government House and arrested Governor Bligh. Police and legal officials were dismissed and in some cases arrested and tried. The leaders of the Rebellion, Major Johnston and John Macarthur insisted that they were freeing the Colony from tyrannical rule. There were, however, many settlers who opposed them and who supported Bligh. They shared the Governor's vision of an Australia peopled by small farmers rather than a society dominated by a wealthy landowning and trading class. A number of them, including George Suttor, the real-life father in this story, went to jail for their opposition. Even a cursory knowledge of the time suggests powerful personalities and ideas in conflict. These ideas resonate in our own society. Good story can be teased out of the more every day events of normal life, but a powerful tale of honour and a clash of ideologies were there in 1808.

I knew that there was a lot of research material available. The Historical Records of NSW and the Historical Records of Australia in the Mitchell Library in the State Library of NSW contain all the correspondence from the early Governors and some citizens of the colony back to the Government and bureaucrats in London. As well there are records of the trials, in NSW, of those who opposed the Rebellion and in London of those who perpetrated it. Secondary source material also exists detailing the Rebellion itself and also recounting various aspects of life in Sydney Town and the outlying settlement at the beginning of the nineteenth century. I knew that by reading nineteenth century fiction I would also absorb something of the syntax and the voice of the time.

No writing is easy writing historical fiction has special difficulties as the writer tries to fashion a work, which will draw the reader in to a time and place with which they can identify. The historical

events may be being determined by economic and political forces beyond the comprehension of a child protagonist in the case of these books, a narrator in a diary. And in order to fully engage the reader, that protagonist has to be just that a participant, an agent in the action. So Deborah Lisson has her young boy stowing away on the Catalpa and being a significant bearer of messages that leads to the successful escape, Nadia Wheatley places her young girl, Rosa Aarons, right there when Peter Lalor must escape, and I place my fictitious lad in the grounds of Government House as the Rebels of 1808 pound on the door and demand the presence of Governor Bligh. In every case, the child is fictitious, in every case, it could have happened.

I have made much of the fact that these books are born of the Trade publisher and not the educational one. They are not dictated to by syllabus or curriculum. And that is how it should be. For fiction must come from a free and receptive mind. All writing requires a creativity and craft, but good fiction is the product of sustained thought, of an investigation of the human condition of a fashioning of language and ideas and images to create something far greater than the sum of its parts. The fiction writer must find the voice that suits those ideas, that story that she is trying to tell. And if the form is a diary set in the 19th century, then that voice must be credible

The challenge for the fiction writer is to reduce the complexities in the historical events to the day-to-day experience of the child on the ground. One has to imagine the knowledge, the feelings and the responses of the child caught up in or witnessing these moments. And then one must use every skill that we have to convey that. It is the minutiae, the detail of the moment, of the land and time the characters inhabit as well as their inner lives that will transport the reader into the world of the story. And by that act of transporting, the novelist can bring to life time past and can allow the readers to make the connections between that time and now.

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