

# SUBMISSIONS

**SUBMISSION NO:**

**01**

**SUPPLEMENTARY TO:**

## Parallel Importation of Books

**SUBMISSION FROM**

**Robert D Morrison**

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SUBMISSION MADE TO THE COMMISSION INVESTIGATING COPYRIGHT  
RESTRICTIONS ON THE PARALLEL IMPORTATION OF BOOKS. BY ROBERT  
DANIEL MORRISON (NOVEMBER 14, 2008.)

I do not know to what extent the Commission has been informed or will be informed as to the state of modern publishing in Australia, so I crave its indulgence while I set out the current situation as I see it as briefly, succinctly and impartially as I can

The standard novel has until recent times since it first came into existence, probably in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, has been a product of the writer's imagination, written as well as he or she can write and a work of art in that it is a form of creative self-expression in which the writer has something to say, not just something written to make money. However, from fairly early on there were attempts to write purely commercial novels. They were the "dime novels" and "penny dreadfuls" of their day. There is also romance fiction and various other forms in which merit as literature is replaced in importance by saleability.

The commercial novel has now grown to become the giant best-seller, the "page turner," of today. Their writers seem to show more talent for research than for creative writing, and indeed they appear to have more in common with journalists than with what have now become known as "literary novelists."

Just like the old penny dreadfuls, modern commercial novels are based heavily on research into historic incidents, sometimes actual events that are fictionalised, or come from the writer's own former life as lawyers, doctors, military men, or journalists with experience in unusual field of science like forensic medicine. The writing is simple so that the most ill-educated and unintelligent person can read it, or as an example of what literary writer Christopher Koch called "the little red fire engine school of writing". They are grossly overwritten to include the fruits of all that research the writer did. Characterisation and plot development is minimal given the size of these books. Clearly the writers have nothing to say beyond "buy me." One literary critic said of one of these writers "Archer has nothing to say in this novel, as he did in his last, and as he no doubt will go on doing." These novels usually have little or no literary merit whatever and do little if anything to truly hold a mirror up to nature or reveal a country's culture.

Having discovered that these commercial novels sell so much better than most literary novels because of their easy-reading entertainment value for the mass of people who don't usually read, the mostly big foreign-owned publishers in Australia now only publish the latter if the writer already has a following of readers. They also bring into Australia large numbers of "remaindered" paperback novels published overseas (mostly by them) and sold for prices lower than production costs. Such dumping practices are illegal under the Trade Practices Act for other products, but apparently not for novels since there are no prosecutions. New literary writers have very little chance of publication by the big publishers. Such writers either publish their book themselves, an expensive and risky business, or try to get their book published by one of the small, independent publishers.

So it is not hard to deduce that the small publisher is the backbone of literary culture in this country. And what has been done by Governments for these publishers to ensure their continued existence? Nothing. They throw large sums of money at successful literary novelists, who can survive without it, but for these small publishers they do almost less than nothing. The Howard Government, for instance, took away the Book Bounty, a sum of money made available to publishers for bringing out the work of Australian writers. Since nothing is done to stop the big publishers from dumping foreign paperback novels on the Australian market, small publishers are also faced with grossly unfair competition from books sold for prices lower than their own production costs.

Now, with the small publishers on their knees, the powers that be want to further reduce the capacity of these final bastions of Australian literary culture to exist with proposals to introduce restrictions on their continuing capacity to function. It's true, that some people actually see no use for traditional culture. Sport is now our culture, they say. We are a country of multi-cultures, they say. The past is dead. It has no relevance to Australia today. And so, if our country were ever involved in some cataclysm, to what would we turn to find out what and who we are? How do we find our Australian identity through the maze of all those multi-cultures?

After the Second World War a leading member of the new Government of Austria was reportedly asked how it was that the country was able to recover so quickly from the depredations of Nazism. He replied that it was because Austria had such a rich culture before the Nazis came on the scene, particularly their literary culture, and so were able to “find themselves” very quickly after the Nazi regime was defeated. What would Australia have to remind us of what we essentially are? Not sport, which is no more at best than an enjoyable way to pass the time contributing little if anything to our intellectual life or history. If those whose proposals have lead to this investigation succeed perhaps we will have nothing.

My basic submission is that nothing should be done in respect of parallel importations or any other thing that might threaten the sometimes fragile financial viability of what has become the major supporter of the nation’s written culture, the small Australian-owned publishers. Rather, ways should be found to ensure that they can continue to publish Australian novels. The publisher of my own fourth novel, *The Betrayers* (Indra Publishing of Melbourne) can no longer afford to do so.

With respect,

Robert D. Morrison.

14 November 2008