



BRIGHTON SOUTH AUSTRALIA 5048 .

14th April 2009

Dear Members of the Productivity Commission,

I am an enraged Australian writer.

Introduction to my problem:

Although I am best known for having written *Possum Magic*, the iconic Australian children's picture book, I have also written thirty seven other books: thirty three picture books for young children, many of which have been long-term best sellers in Australia and America; and five books for adults, one of which—*Reading Magic*—has been also been a bestseller in both countries.

Until now I have stayed out of the prize fight you're currently refereeing between booksellers and the rest of the publishing/writing community in the hope that good sense would prevail, that monstrously greedy booksellers and their massive campaign of misinformation would be sent packing; and that you would be able to recognize the difference between publishers of books and writers of books, and have an understanding of their distinct needs. This hasn't happened yet. I'm so alarmed by the ramifications of this issue that I'm now donning boxing gloves and joining the fray myself.

Possum Magic, my first book, was published in 1983 and has been in print, in hard back, ever since. It is a much loved book in this country and a celebrated publishing phenomenon, having sold over three and a half million copies in Australia alone. However, for reasons which I will make clear in this submission, **had the regime that the booksellers are currently campaigning for been in place in 1983 *Possum Magic* would never have been published. Without it, two generations of Australian children would have been denied the opportunity to make a strong creative**

connection to their own language, their own culture, their cities, their iconic foods, their vast country and the unique animals that live within it.

Does this matter? Indeed, I think it does.

A little history:

In the seventies and early eighties very few Australian-themed picture books were written or published in Australia. Publishers feared that without the possibility of overseas sales they wouldn't be able to afford to publish a book in Australian alone. *Possum Magic* was rejected nine times by Australian publishers, many of whom claimed it was 'too Australian.' Too Australian! For Australian children! How wrong they proved to be.

I had written the book in a rage in the first place at the lack of books for young Australian readers. How could Aussie kids find and validate themselves in the books they read, I asked myself. Where could they celebrate their own culture? Why would they ever—*how* could they ever elevate Australia to a status equal to that of America and Britain? How would they ever be able to rid themselves of their parents' maddening cultural cringe and happily accept, and be proud of being Australian? My answer to these hectic, urgent questions was to write the wildly Australian story of *Possum Magic*.

The generation who grew up on *Possum Magic* is the first generation of Australians to grow up on Australian books. Those readers are now buying *Possum Magic* for their own children. Do we want to abandon our terrific industry just as it is taking root? The English have had A. A. Milne for three generations. The US have had *Goodnight Moon* for two. We once lagged behind in providing Australian books for Australian children.

Now that we've finally achieved a thriving industry which makes huge a contribution to the coffers and culture of our nation *we must not let it go.*

The affronting demands of foreign publishers:

Possum Magic was not published in the USA until many years after its publication in Australia. Among other editorial requests, American publishers wanted to Americanize the book by replacing 'lamingtons' with 'brownies' and 'pavlova' with 'cheesecake'. I refused to allow its publication under such circumstances. I held out, aghast that they

were demanding the kinds of changes in my text that Australians would never ask for in theirs. We expect Australian children to have enough lively intelligence to understand and appreciate different ways of using English and I was determined that American children should be accorded the same right, and that they should be able to learn about our culture in an unadulterated way.

In the end I weakened—an action I now deeply regret—and allowed a glossary of terms to appear at the end of the US edition of *Possum Magic*. (I wouldn't do *that* again.) **If the grasping new breed of booksellers in Australia had their way, this glossary-added edition of *Possum Magic* would now appear in Australia as an insult to Australian readers. It would demean our country, lower our cultural esteem and once again cast doubt on our validity as a proud, inimitable nation.**

Another popular book of mine: *Koala Lou*, has been re-printed 32 times in its Australian edition because Australian children—astonishingly!—like reading Australian stories. But in a similar moment of *Possum Magic* weakness, and equally regrettably, I allowed in a US edition the replacement of the word 'track' in *Koala Lou* ('...she went down the track all by herself...'). I permitted it to become 'path' which is about as far from a track as you can imagine in the Australian context. The gutsy feel of the Australian bush is lost entirely when 'path' is used. **If the mad crop of ignorant booksellers in Australia had their way this Americanized edition of *Koala Lou* would now appear in Australia, much to the puzzlement of Australian readers, yet again demeaning their country, watering down their cultural identity, undermining their national esteem, and the rest...**

Thirdly, in *Hunwicks' Egg* I chose a bilby as my main character to heighten awareness of its status as an endangered species. A colleague at the time, John Hunwick, had been instrumental in establishing a chocolate bilby to replace the Easter bunny and I was keen to add my voice to the campaign. I have been praised many times for choosing to highlight the bilby in this book (even though the story itself has nothing to do with the bilby as an endangered creature). The Americans thought 'bilby' too specific, too 'difficult'. They asked if it could be a bandicoot instead. A bilby is indeed a bandicoot, but a very specific one. No one in Australia is anxious about bandicoots in general.

So I changed 'bilby' to 'bandicoot' in the USA edition. Apart from the fact that one word has two syllables and the other has three, thereby disturbing the perfection I aim for in

writing sentences for young children, it wasn't a distressing change. However, had that change been made to the story in an edition written for an international market which was then going to be imported back into Australia there would have been a huge cultural loss: no bilby, no raised awareness of its existence, no celebration of its quaintness, no further understanding of our country's special and fascinating fauna. In other words: entire point lost! **Culture crushed!**

Yet this is precisely what Australian booksellers are asking us as a nation to sacrifice, for the spuriously-claimed 'cheaper' book. It's a price too far, a toll too great.

Please help us to avoid this national tragedy.

Booksellers v. writers, Round 153:

Imagine how appalled I am, after twenty six years of fighting and winning this enormous cultural battle, to discover that the crazy booksellers of this nation want to wind the clock back and stomp on our culture with jackboots? They haven't a skerrick of understanding as to what their proposals would mean. **They appear to want to make it mandatory for Australian books to have internationally-accepted (i.e. American) vocabulary** so that presumably dim-witted overseas readers can understand our works more easily, and overseas publishers can publish our work more often and in greater quantities—and more cheaply (supposedly: there is no proof of that)—thereby providing a spuriously-claimed 'cheaper' book to be imported back into this country? **Do the booksellers have any inkling that it would mean the end of Australian writing and publishing as we now know it?**

Does the Commission understand the ramifications of the booksellers' iniquitous proposals? for our cultural heritage? (If not, please begin reading this submission again, from the top.)

The current cost of picture books in Australia:

No one has ever complained to me about the cost of my books. The delight they bring, the literacy they engender, the bonding they facilitate, and their Australian-ness evince a happy willingness by the Australian community to pay the recommended retail price. At the risk of skiting (to use a lovely old Australian term) my books are so highly valued

that when they're on sale at various events booksellers often receive complaints if a particular book is not available in hardback—twice the price of a soft-back copy.

The fearsome matter of copyright:

And to another matter entirely: copyright. **It is beyond belief to hear that the Productivity Commission is suggesting essentially the elimination of territorial copyright.** Who are we, for God's sake? Some immoral developing nation like China, which chooses to ignore the legality of brand names and copyright in order to make a fast and tainted buck?

What on earth would possess a Commission that wanted to deprive me of a lifelong right to own the work that I have produced out of my workaholic life and particular talent? **American and British writers would never allow themselves to be in such a situation—to compete unequally, internationally, in a tough industry. And what's more, their patriotic governments would find it unthinkable to take their copyright from them.**

Would we allow an America firm to steal the design of a machine made in Australia? Would we permit Britain to copy, for example, without payment or recognition, the science behind the cochlear implant? Of course not.

The abandonment of copyright is theft on a grand scale. It's really frightening. I implore the Commission to prevent this from happening.

First year sales—a misconception:

Another misunderstanding of the Commission which needs immediate correction is that books sell most of their copies in the first year of publication. This has not been the case in my experience: the longer a book is out and on the bestseller lists the more people know about it and the more it sells. *Possum Magic* and *Where Is The Green Sheep?*, to name but two of my classics, have sold many more copies in the years after their initial publication. *Possum Magic* is still in hard back after 26 years, as I have already mentioned, whereas most books in this country go out of hard back within two years in order to increase sales in subsequent years through soft-back copies. **Soft-back copies often increase sales massively in the third and fourth years of a book's publication. These back-list sales are how I manage to earn the constant**

living that enables me to set out yet again to spruik my next work, see below...

The continuing expenses of the job:

I would also like to alert the Commission to how much work and personal expense is involved in the establishment of each new book. As the author of picture books I have to keep my name out there all the time. My audiences are aged zero to four so every few years I have to convince yet another whole new cohort of parents to buy my books for their children. I am now in my sixties but still need to travel extensively around Australia and the USA, often at my own expense, to talk about my work.

Of the 108 trips I have made to the United States I personally paid for 106. The sales I achieved as a consequence of my own marketing have incurred high levels of taxation within Australia which has, needless to say, been of some small benefit to the country.

The Commission doesn't seem to realize how expensive it is for me to continue to be a writer. Loss of copyright, or the adoption of the booksellers' wishes would cause me and eventually Australia itself, a most distressing loss of income and identity.

Differences in international publishing:

I have a complex career. Some of my books originate in Australia, some in the US and one in Britain, but each book is eventually published in the other country. The differences between the industries are fascinating and important. For example, in the matter of book covers, what might be seen as a terrific cover in one territory isn't seen as a strong cover in another. My bestselling book: *Ten Little Fingers And Ten Little Toes* has three different covers for the three territories in which it's published. Each cover is right for that country only.

A writer needs a publisher in each territory, not only for editorial and book-cover purposes but also for marketing. **If my American publishers were selling books into the Australian domain how could they possibly market them properly? The Australian market is after all, a 'foreign' market for them and would be treated with the disdain that 'foreign' implies in the American context.**

A final plea:

I feel certain that the Productivity Commission, along with the vast majority of the community, had little idea prior to this maelstrom of just how complex and fragile the writing and publishing business is in Australia.

My great hope is that this submission of mine will help you to see reason regarding an industry that is crucial to Australia's economic and cultural interests, and to save it. In you I trust.

Mem Fox

April 14th 2009