

# Australian author

For writers, readers and everyone who loves books

## DIFFERENT STROKES

Why can't a novelist write  
the perfect play?

*by Louis Nowra*

Tim Herbert pursues  
the publicity hounds

The Copyright Wars  
by Wilson da Silva

Elizabeth Jolley's  
love of prose





# JUST SHOOT ME!

## PLAYING THE PUBLICITY GAME

It is no longer enough just to write a book, you have to be willing to flog it as well. As **Tim Herbert** reports, writers today also need to be polished performers.

**S**OME AUSTRALIAN AUTHORS are just mad for publicity. Take Brett De La Mare, who parachuted his way into the grounds of Buckingham Palace late last year declaring that he was prepared to do "whatever craziness it takes" to attract attention to his outback adventure novel. Desperate self-promotion may not be the best approach. Months down the track, Brett De La Mare's novel has failed to interest any publisher.

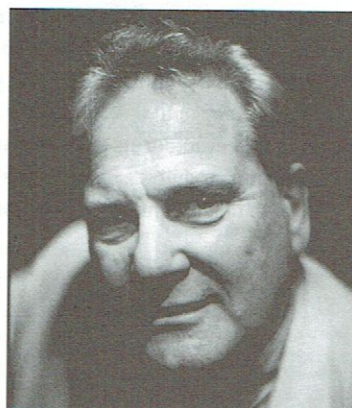
When it comes to published authors, the conventions of drawing attention to a new book are more predictable. A public profile plays a large part in this, incorporating readings at bookshops, attending panels at literary festivals and media interviews. All up, this promotional network can be quite demanding, especially for local writers.

Casting her panoptic eye about the publishing world, long-time literary agent Lyn Tranter thinks there is more pressure on authors to perform in Australia than in any other country. Tranter cites the web of

writers' festivals from Adelaide to Hobart, to Byron Bay and beyond, and how surprised (and sometimes unnerved) European and American authors can be, should they end up doing an antipodean leg of their global book tour. Certainly in a marketplace overrun with titles, without publicity and promotion, the shelf life of a book can be alarmingly brief, a situation exacerbated in Australia by the small market and limited media access. "I can see a time soon when you'll have to submit your manuscript along with a video," jests Tranter.

Rose Creswell, another literary agent who has been part of the industry for decades, is aware of these recent shifts in the publishing world but does not believe writers should feel pressured. Creswell advises clients in her stable who can't handle public speaking or the process of self-promotion to "just say no".

Of course this may not be so easy any more, especially when some publishers insist on a contract that requires authors to



Frank Moorhouse says being yourself is no longer good enough.



Di Morrissey feels sorry for those who sat through her early appearances.

their marketeers. It's rumoured that one Vogel award-winning author has been shafted (coded as "creative disagreement") because of indignation that the promotional circuit was taking up so much of their time.

For those writers willing to play the game, there is no uniform approach when it comes to giving readings or discussing their work with an audience. According to grand man of Oz Lit, Frank Moorhouse, "It should be like adult education, an extension of the story-telling art." At the same time, Moorhouse acknowledges that "it's hard to be effective in this performance culture". When I suggest that being yourself might be the best way to begin, Moorhouse is dubious. "No, that's not good enough any more. That's the old school of writing," he insists.

Moorhouse can recollect the early days of readings, notably at the Harold Park Hotel in Sydney, where authors such as Frank Hardy were invariably sozzled by the time they hit the stage, their storytelling soon reduced to a word salad of

be available for two weeks of publicity. Dissenting authors may muck up the strategy of



incoherence. Moorhouse has experienced his own uninspired moments while reading in public. He recalls a discussion with Helen Garner about the importance of breathing and timing. "You can lose your way and feel that the audience is not responding and a big black hole develops and you start to gabble and all you can think of is you want to get out."

An attack of nerves can happen to anyone. Popular author Di Morrissey had been the glamorous co-host on *Good Morning Australia*, yet could have done with a few cue-cards when first venturing on her literary tour. "I hadn't been to a literary lunch or festival and no one gave me any tips or advice. I had no idea what they were expecting, or what I was doing, except somehow it had to sell my book," she recalls.

Morrissey, best-selling author of sweeping romance novels, including *Tears of the Moon*, feels sorry for those "poor ladies who sat through my first efforts" and suggests that anyone starting off should consider getting help. Although she is still unsettled by a large audience, Morrissey avoids preparing a formal speech; rather, she attempts to sense the mood of the room and work from there. "I've stopped regarding the audience as the enemy and a strange friendship is quickly established," she says.

**W**HILE THERE ARE many writers out there who choose to pop a betablocker or two should the lectern be looming, Arabella Edge, whose first novel, *The*

## How to improve your performance

Prior to your performance, try to make time for three things.

- **Physical exercise.** Even a walk around the block can clear the mind and shake out some of the anxiety from your body.
- **Stillness and solitude.** Preferably after your exercise and closer to your performance time, find a quiet place where you can be alone and uninterrupted. Lie on your back with your feet on the ground and your knees bent. Breathe. (It's amazing how easy it is to forget to breathe when your adrenalin is pumping.) Elongate your breathing pattern so you can tell your body it's all right. If you normally breathe three counts in and three counts out, double this time. Nervousness invites shortness of breath which affects the body, mind and voice, and the effectiveness of communication in general. Elongating your breathing can help to relax your body and drop your voice into a deeper and calmer place. Continue the breathing exercise up to and even during the silent moments of your performance.
- **Remember what it is you are wishing to give your audience.** This helps to take the focus off your (sometimes self-conscious) self.

Melissa Bruce, Performance Consultant  
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*Company*, appeared in 1999, sought constructive assistance in dealing with nervous tension and enrolled in a short, intensive course at the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney. NIDA conducts various classes, including voice training, though for writers, the two-day Corporate Performance Course is probably the best option. While it may sound like being stuck in a room full of suits with budding MBAs, participants tend to be a diverse bunch on a mission to be more effective communicators. The course aims to analyse and improve the speech patterns, intonation and articulation of attendees, while there are special sessions which, according to the school's flyer, "examine the importance of

body language, body attitude and physicality in relation to the audience".

Melissa Bruce has extensive experience as a theatre director and now works as an independent performance consultant. Many of her clients are writers, and have sought her help in overcoming performance nerves or in simply getting their message across with clarity and conviction. Her method is not formula-based. "I am more like a therapist, defining symptoms and working through fears and inadequacies," she tells me.

Bruce discusses the link between the internal working environment and the public one, which in writers, due to their private and solitary craft, does tend to be more pronounced.

"It's the missing bridge," she declares and what she hopes to remedy through consultation. This can begin with relaxation techniques, breathing exercises and even wardrobe tips before setting up preliminary readings and role-play situations.

Julia Leigh, author of the rapturously received first novel *The Hunter*, found her one-hour session with Melissa Bruce an excellent investment. "I had learnt enough through trial and error to realise that there is a basic art to good public speaking, and that it doesn't happen by itself," says Leigh. For this young author, there were basic things to remember such as a comfortable stance, an even distribution of weight and being alert to the different dynamics of the spoken text (marking for pauses or having to identify the speaker, for instance).

Stage fright was never part of the picture for Leigh, but rather ambivalence about showing up. This is an attitude her performance consultant claims to have often struck with first-time authors, wary of fielding questions and having their book scrutinised. The course with Bruce has clearly been a valuable one, for Leigh now affirms, "Above all, respect your audience."

It should be said that publishers themselves might consider promoting a one-hour training session for authors to improve their communication skills. This is something which Julia Leigh would certainly encourage. "Perhaps one day an enlightened publisher will realise



Julia Leigh saw a drama consultant to improve her public speaking.

that offering such little extras will attract authors to a house," she says.

Jeannine Fowler, publicity director at Pan Macmillan, insists that her company will always consider public speaking/media training courses

names feature again and again at wordfests across the land. Kate Grenville, Carmel Bird, Robert Dessaix, to name a few. Lyn Tranter mentions Dorothy Porter, "a fantastic performer", and "the naturally gifted" David Marr as two of the best. Yet, like writing itself, personal appeal is a subjective thing and there are those who prefer the sardonic edge of Dean Kiley or the angry raves of Christos Tsiolkas to the flawless, High Anglican tones of David Marr. Furthermore, even the most stirring performance can have its detractors and recently, Tranter herself bore witness to an emotional Bryce Courtenay reading from his novel about Vietnam veterans, *Smoky Joe's Cafe*, where the only dry eyes in the house were her own.

Although their publishers may

## Writers employ props, stage tricks and fancy dress to liven up their act.

for their authors. "If we sign a first-time author and consider the publication must be supported by a tour we'd definitely assess the author's potential and if necessary suggest a training course," she explains. Fowler is quick to add that "all the training in the world will not help some people", and that signing up such authors for literary festivals and media interviews could end up having an adverse effect on sales.

On the other hand, there are many Australian authors who are such self-assured and engaging speakers that their

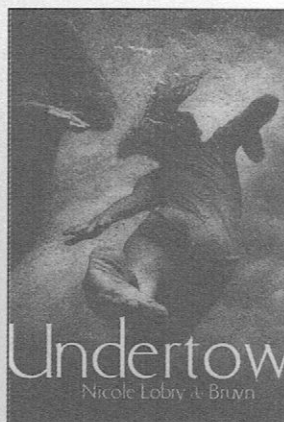
not think it's a brilliant idea, some writers will employ props, stage tricks and even fancy dress to liven up their public readings. Take David Foster, decked out as his character D'Arcy D'Oliveres, the beekeeping postman from Dog Rock in *The Glade Within the Grove*. Tap-dancing novelist Mandy Sayer once recruited a friend to play saxophone between the stacks at Kings Cross Library while she gave a reading during the local arts festival, an ambitious concept foiled by the small turnout of mostly bewildered senior citizens. Meanwhile, the stage



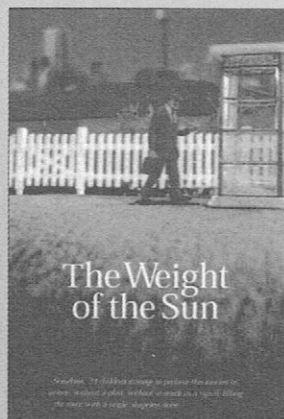
**THE FOG GARDEN**  
Marion Halligan  
Sex, death and gardening, and the stuff that novels are made of...  
Allen & Unwin \$35.00 hc



**ANGEL MINE**  
Ainslie Yardley  
They could almost hear each other's thoughts. This tiny child was dust. No way they could retrieve it intact.  
Allen & Unwin \$24.95 pb



**UNDERTOW**  
Nicole Lobry de Bruyn  
An artfully written novel about family dynamics, infidelity, dependence, and, ultimately, finding the parts of ourselves that make us whole.  
Allen & Unwin \$18.95 pb



**THE WEIGHT OF THE SUN**  
Andrew Humphreys  
Set in Sydney, *The Weight of the Sun* is a black comic novel about a boy and his mother, love and detachment, loneliness and hope.  
Allen & Unwin \$18.95 pb



demeanour of Linda Jaivin, with her droll humour and wicked antics (she has appeared as a leather mistress with bound slave boy in tow), has surely aroused more enthusiasm for her penned erotic romps, from *Eat Me* to *Dead Sexy*.

For authors not backed by a mainstream publisher, trying to solicit attention can be an arduous task. Take Fontanelle Productions, whose first book off the rack is Fiesta Carrera's *Charnel Knowledge*, a blackly comic novel of lesbian bloodlust. Ten years ago any new work of Australian fiction was guaranteed to be reviewed in at least the weekend broadsheets. This is now unlikely. Because of this state of affairs, manager of Fontanelle, Victoria Dawson had dozens of glossy posters of the novel's zany cover printed up. "I have just bought wallpaper paste and a brush and am preparing to summon some of my 1970s bravado," she confides, with her vision set on a line of telegraph poles around Sydney's Oxford Street.

Fontanelle paid a publicist for promotional advice and a list of contacts, mainly press, to send review copies to. At the same time, the distribution company Bulldog was approached. "They were very helpful in arranging interviews and setting up readings for Carrera at Hares & Hyenas as part of Melbourne's Midsumma Festival," says Dawson. Cult figure Fiesta Carrera has often caused a stir with hecklers and walkouts, though this time around the predominantly Sapphic audience were, in the words of the author, "simply glowering". The

reception for Carrera when she returned to read in Sydney as part of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras was more upbeat. Having realised that Carrera's irreverent and very bent storylines go down much better with gay men, the author tour has been useful for Fontanelle to do a market rethink.

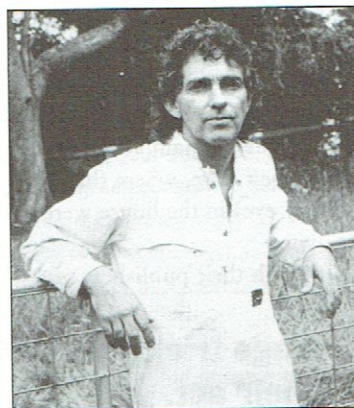
**A**UTHOR TOURS SPREAD the word, but be they cult or pulp, writers who participate invariably end up out of pocket. While Australians are voracious readers and curious to catch their favourite authors in the spotlight, writers would be foolish to perceive touring as a supplementary source of income. Publishers' budgets or festival funding covers only the basics with enough for a nightcap from the hotel minibar.

Not for us the speaker tours that are part of the well-funded university circuit in the US, where competition to secure authors from around the nation means big bucks can be earned in a short, concentrated burst (and writers can gratefully get back to what our own Bryce Courtenay dubs "bum glue"). Such a situation is not about to happen in Australia, where filling up an auditorium is generally confined to motivational speakers, such as Norman Schwarzkopf, Melinda Gainsford-Taylor or Mr Demtel.

Whether all the energy and expense of author tours in Australia is compensated for by an increase in sales is another prickly subject. Di Morrissey is not convinced of the benefits of sporadic touring; these days she



Some audiences prefer the angry raves of Christos Tsiolkas.



David Foster dressed up as one of his characters for a reading.

avoids festival-hopping. She believes that literary lunches and seminars are a more effective promotional tool. "Readers who have met you or listened to you in such an environment seem to maintain a loyal bond," she says. Better still are the media and Morrissey has enough experience to know her forte: "I concentrate on print, TV and radio. Especially radio."

Quite a few high profile Australian authors avoid being interviewed by newspapers these days and prefer television, where they can retain some control of

the medium and have a wider impact. The biggest literary players can invariably divert the wheels of publicity, even electing to make a cult of their reclusiveness. One is reminded of Murray Bail and the abundant media that appeared with *Eucalyptus*, almost every article of which stressed that Bail does not do interviews!

Perhaps such authors have realised that simply relying on one's publicists to garner media attention for a new book does not always produce the best result. Sometimes, the wrong kind of exposure can lead to other risks. *Broometime*, the controversial memoir written by Anne Coombs and Susan Varga, was featured on the front-page of the *Australian* and has become an ongoing saga.

While disgruntled Broome townfolk depicted in the book are threatening a class action, the bewildered authors insist that their memoir is an "an affectionate portrayal". But how can this be when publishers Hodder Headline have been promoting the book as an antipodean version of John Berendt's monster-seller, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*? Why, the very words on the launch invitation from Broome, seem to support such a spin: "Come and join the characters...to share their delight or horror at being so nakedly exposed."

As for the authors, Anne Coombs' exposure on Channel Nine's *Today* show with a fifteen minute grilling from Tracy Grimshaw would suggest that publicity has its own



momentum. One wonders why these women were not running for cover, but then *Broometime* had during that week sold out in Western Australia. As a former freelancer on the *Australian*, the broadsheet that carried the scoop, Anne Coombs, like her publisher, would understand the value of controversy and it's only speculation to claim that she and Varga have to a degree been set up. There is also a contradiction inherent in that publishers love an author being provocative so long as libel remains just a threat and the pulp mill is kept at bay.

With so many variables, the notion of ideal publicity is as amorphous as the ideal reader. Attracting the right kind of reader might be closer to the


magazine *Jacket* functions in this way, as well as being an excellent resource with links to many sites that promote postmodern poetry and criticism. Alan Wearne, whose verse novel *The Lovemakers* has just been released, has done some investing of his own, namely in a spoken word CD that has been launched concurrently with the book. Penguin have allowed Wearne to use the arresting graphic on the novel's cover for the CD, which has been produced at Wollongong University and contains an hour of the poet reciting with musical interludes.

Wearne's last book was *The Nightmarkets* (1986) and it has taken him 13 years to complete the 700 pages of *The*

**"No one would have promoted a novel like this... last time around all I got was a train ticket to Sydney and a taxi voucher."**

mark. Smart scribblers in the clever country realise they sometimes have to take the initiative in order to do this. Di Morrissey leaves nothing to chance and takes her publicity literally in her own hands. "I am thinking of a PR campaign for my novel as I research it. I take photos or get video footage of the location, people, historical stuff that can be used," she informs me via email, a medium she prefers with journalists so as not to be misquoted.

Poets, too, can be just as media savvy while being alert to the art and technological craft of securing a broader base of readers. John Tranter's online

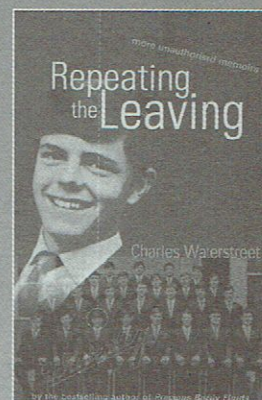
*Lovemakers*, with Book One having now been published. "No one would have promoted a novel like this in the mid 80s. Why, last time around all I got was a train ticket to Sydney and a taxi voucher," says Wearne. Aware that there's much more hype about the publicity machine these days, he laughs as he points out a space to be filled on the Author's Marketing and Publicity Questionnaire. "Have you any famous relatives or ancestors?" it asks. One can only hope that Brett De La Mare never gets his hands on this.  *Tim Herbert is a Sydney writer and co-editor of Love Cries (Angus & Robertson, 1995).*

## REPEATING THE LEAVING

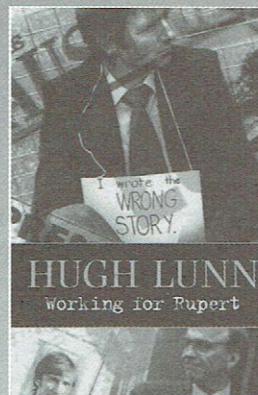
Charles Waterstreet

Charlie's back! And this time the hero of *Precious Bodily Fluids* is sixteen, the hormones are pumping, and he's desperately trying to join the 60's sexual revolution from the frustrating confines of a Sydney boarding school.

April 2001



Sceptre



Hodder

## WORKING FOR RUPERT

Hugh Lunn

Hugh's back too! Hugh Lunn's brilliant account of his days as a Murdoch foot-soldier - a sequel to *Over The Top With Jim* and *Head Over Heels* - both Australian classics

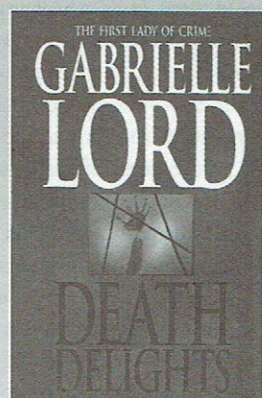
July 2001

## DEATH DELIGHTS

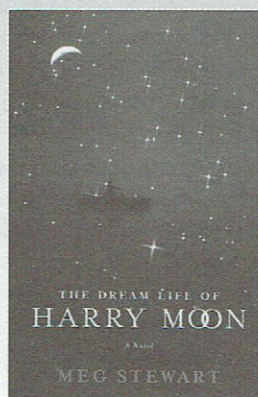
Gabrielle Lord

An intricate story, full of psychological suspense and horror, in which the past grips the present and people can only move on once they have acknowledged and exorcised its power.

July 2001



Hodder



Sceptre

## THE DREAM LIFE OF HARRY MOON

Meg Stewart

Harry Moon is a dream vendor, and just what blocked writer Miranda needs at this moment in her life. Even if her friends do insist she's going crazy.

April 2001