

Not your average reader: Interviewing literary agents, editors, and publishers

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Abstract:

When readers are described as ‘average’ or ‘ordinary’, this is typically meant to exclude the reading experiences of literary scholars and professional critics, whose experiences dominate literary theory and criticism. But what of the reading experiences of literary agents, editors, and publishers? They are, of course, not your average reader; they are also undoubtedly ‘professional’ readers. Nonetheless, their engagement with books often more closely resembles the engagement of a fan rather than a critic. It is, therefore, remarkable that researchers of reading and publishing studies scholars have only rarely considered using interviews to engage with the narrated experiences and memories of literary agents, editors, and publishers. This article uses a case study – interviews with American publishing professionals who have contributed to the publication of local editions of books originally published in Australia – to reflect on the insights, which would not have been otherwise available, afforded by a research methodology that includes interviews. Interviews with authors typically concern a book’s origins, while interviews with readers concern its endings; perhaps interviews with publishing professionals can bridge these two states, as well as bringing together researchers of reading and publishing studies scholars.

Keywords: publishing studies, book history, interview, reading studies, reception studies

Introduction

Book history examines all those aspects of the book that have historically been seen as incidental to the main purpose of the book, which is to transmit ideas, but in fact crucially inform this process. James L West observes that book history ‘usually ... concentrate[s] on a group of related topics: authorship, bookselling, printing, publishing, distribution, and reading’. Each of these six topics crucially informs the meaning-making potential of the book. It is the intersection of two of these topics – publishing and reading – that is the focus

of this article. More specifically, this article attempts to build a bridge between publishing studies and reading or reception studies using interviews with literary agents, editors, and publishers as the building material.

Publishing studies and reading or reception studies are less well-developed approaches to the study of book history compared to some other approaches, such as analytical bibliography, which is the study of books as physical objects, with an emphasis on the details of their printing and production. As recently as 2009, David Carter acknowledged that the former approaches are still in their infancy: 'We've had both publishing history and literary history, but we're still learning how to bring them together beyond the individual case: perhaps even more so with studies of reading' (41). Indeed, as Carter alludes to, an interest in reading developed among scholars of book history even more recently than their interest in publishing. In 2002, for example, Christine Pawley used the present continuous verb form when she observed that 'the history of the book *is shifting* attention from texts to readers' (143, emphasis added). To put this into context, the 'turn to the reader' in literary theory and criticism is widely understood to have occurred in the 1970s; this 'turn' clearly did not occur simultaneously among researchers of book history (Grosman 159).

Perhaps as a result of their late adoption of reading or reception studies as an approach to the study of book history, scholars in the field have been especially slow in taking up interviewing as a research methodology. Of course, partly this is due to book history's emphasis on *history*. Book history scholars seem to have a particular investment in literature from the Gutenberg era through to the end of the nineteenth century; it is far less common to find book history scholarship about more recent developments in the book. Thus, historical subjects are often not available to be interviewed.

However, reading or reception studies is not the only approach to book history with a decidedly more contemporary bent that makes interview subjects potentially available to researchers. Publishing studies is another approach that fits the bill. Millicent Weber and Aaron Mannion contrast the 'largely *historical* focus of most of the critical work' performed by researchers of book history with the 'scholarly research into *contemporary* publishing' (182, emphasis added). Weber and Mannion further observe, 'Publishing studies is deeply attuned to the commercial and pragmatic considerations that govern industry participation ... [because] it converged as a discipline following the introduction of tertiary programs designed to produce future industry employees' (191). If a research program is to have any chance of yielding findings that are of 'commercial and pragmatic' value, clearly it is going to have to focus on the contemporary period.

Nonetheless, research about twenty-first-century publishing tends to neglect the possibilities of interviewing publishing professionals – a remarkable oversight considering the historical affordances that make these individuals available to researchers. In response to this oversight, this article uses a case study to reflect on the insights, which would not have been otherwise available, afforded by a research methodology that includes interviews. More specifically, it fills a gap in the available research by using interviews to engage with the narrated experiences and memories of American literary agents, editors,

and publishers who have contributed to the publication of local editions of books originally published in Australia. Interviews with authors typically concern a book's origins, while interviews with readers concern its endings; perhaps interviews with publishing professionals can bridge these two states, as well as bring together book history and publishing studies scholars with researchers of reading or reception studies.

Interviews in publishing studies and book history

Arguably the most influential book in twenty-first-century publishing studies is John B Thompson's *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*. Thompson – a professor of sociology at the University of Cambridge – details his research methodology in the book's preface: 'I carried out around 280 interviews with senior executives, publishers, editors, sales directors, marketing directors, publicists, and other managers and employees in many publishing firms, from the large corporations to the small indie presses' (xiv). In spite of his book's influence, Thompson's methodology is uncommon among scholars of twenty-first-century publishing.

Thompson's research is cited in four of the nine essays included in the anthology *Publishing Means Business: Australian Perspectives*. In one of these essays, Mark Davis describes the influence of Thompson's research in the following manner:

Since I've been teaching and researching within publishing studies [since 2003], there have been major changes in the discipline. Book history was, when I began, primarily historical. People like Robert Darnton, John Thompson, and Ted Striphas fundamentally changed the practice taking publishing studies and book history from historically focused disciplines and moving them into the realm of media studies and cultural studies. (Weber and Mannion 197)

This quotation is from an interview with Davis (a scholar of Australian digital literary cultures and taste making) conducted by Weber and Mannion and included in their essay in *Publishing Means Business*, 'Discipline and Publish: Disciplinary Boundaries in Publishing Studies'. Indeed, this essay contains quotes from several interviews conducted by its authors, but notably all of the interview subjects are academics, not publishing professionals. These interview subjects are appropriate considering the essay's focus – the boundaries of the academic discipline known as 'publishing studies' – but the interviews used throw into sharp contrast the book's relative paucity of interviews with publishing professionals. *Publishing Means Business* includes a couple of essays that use interviews with authors (Zwar and Masson) but none with publishing professionals.

In addition to research that draws upon interviews with authors, it is becoming relatively commonplace among book history scholars (though not in *Publishing Means Business*) to find research that draws upon interviews with readers to find out about how people receive, read, and use texts. Pawley is a book history scholar who has played a prominent role in this development by outlining 'a process whereby historians can research,

investigate, and analyze the reading habits of historical actors' (Downey). Pawley refers to these 'historical actors' by many different names, but she seems particularly interested in 'ordinary' readers. Notably, when Pawley uses this term, she places it in quotation marks, thus indicating its problematic or unresolved status. She does not, however, attempt to define what it means for a reader to be 'ordinary', except to say that 'such readers rarely left individual records of their lives; while they may have kept diaries, and perhaps wrote letters, because of a class, gender, race, and even regional bias in archival collecting opportunities and policies, these have rarely survived' (Pawley 145). One type of reader definitely excluded by Pawley's most modest of criteria for 'ordinary' is the professional reader. Indeed, when readers are described as 'average' or 'ordinary', this typically excludes the reading experiences of literary scholars and professional critics, whose experiences dominate literary theory and criticism.

Moreover, 'average' or 'ordinary' readers are increasingly the focus of reading or reception studies. For example, there has been, in recent years, a growth of research working at the intersection of reading or reception studies and digital humanities. Some of the better-known projects in this space are the UK Reading Experience Database (UK RED), the What Middletown Read Project, and the Australian Common Reader; an ambitious new project in the works is the Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool (READ-IT). Some of these interactive digital databases of reading habits and practices explicitly claim to capture 'the reading habits and practices of *ordinary* Australians since the nineteenth century' ('About', emphasis added). Other projects are not quite so explicit about their interest in 'ordinary' readers, but scholars have deduced as much:

The What Middletown Read database ... make[s] visible patterns of reading by *ordinary* readers. (Tatlock 306, emphasis added)

Historians of reading have long asserted the difficulty of studying '*ordinary* readers' as opposed to 'professional intellectuals'. This might change into the future, as collaborative projects such as the Reading Experience Database ... provide a forum for collecting individual reading experiences from a potentially broad range of people. (Lamond 32, emphasis added)

Clearly, the 'ordinary' reader is understood – at a minimum – to be a non-professional reader.

But what of the reading experiences of literary agents, editors, and publishers? They are, of course, not your 'average' reader; they are also undoubtedly professional readers. Nonetheless, their engagement with books often more closely resembles the engagement of a fan (which is a type of 'ordinary' reader) rather than a critic or scholar (types of professional readers). In describing a publishing professional's initial encounter with a manuscript that he or she may decide to publish as a book, Thompson paints a picture of the fan-like qualities possessed by even the most professional editors and publishers:

So if you are an editor or publisher in a trade house, how do you form a view about a book or a project when there are few solid anchor points? How do you determine the indeterminate? ... First and foremost, you rely on your judgement based on a reading of the proposal or the manuscript. You will be looking for certain things depending on the kind of book it is, but ultimately it is a very personal reaction on the part of the editor, 'your instinctive passionate embrace of the item that is on offer', as one agent put it. (195)

Thompson is not alone in painting this picture of literary agents, editors, and publishers as 'ordinary' readers that get really excited about books – or manuscripts, as is usually the case. Diane Brown, in her PhD dissertation *Publishing Culture: Commissioning Books in Australia, 1970–2000*, writes about Susan Hawthorne, co-founder and publisher of Spinifex Press: 'Hawthorne discussed the notion of publisher as "first reader" and her excitement at reading new material for the first time and wanting to share her enthusiasm with others' (179). The desire to share one's enthusiasm with others is a feature that is commonly used to define fan culture, or fandom (Coppa). Brown also includes the following quotation from her interview with Hawthorne, in which Hawthorne speaks about her working relationship with co-founder Renate Klein: 'We don't stop each other if there's enough enthusiasm because that's what makes a book work' (166). Or, as the editor in chief of an independent publishing house in New York City put it when I interviewed him, 'The strength of the story is the number one factor [influencing an acquisitions decisions]. I have to fall in love with the story'. Clearly, not all actions taken by these publishing professionals can be explained in exclusively professional terms.

Sidelining interviews

On those rare occasions when scholars of twenty-first-century publishing studies see fit to conduct interviews with publishing professionals, both the interviews and the interviewees are typically sidelined within their research output. This is contrary to Thompson's approach in *Merchants of Culture*, in which interviews are a highly visible (and clearly valued) component. Another particularly notable exception is Susan L Greenberg's *Editors Talk about Editing: Insights for Readers, Writers and Publishers*, which is a collection of interviews with thirteen editors; however, this book's main purpose is to 'offer original source material' (3) rather than present its own 'full evaluation of interpretive frameworks relevant to editing' (7).

To demonstrate the phenomenon of scholars of twenty-first-century publishing studies sidelining interviews within their research output, I have selected as case studies two highly regarded monographs in the field: Beth Driscoll's *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* and Simone Murray's *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation*. My choice of these two books was admittedly arbitrary, though I wanted books (like these two) that tackle

topics that would seem to invite commentary by professionals in the book industry, whether by publishers, editors, publicists, literary agents, rights managers, literary festival directors, literary prize directors, professional book reviewers, or booksellers. Furthermore, I wanted book-length monographs so that it was undeniable that the authors had the word count available to them to include material sourced from interviews. Finally, I selected these two books because there exists virtually unanimous agreement within the field of publishing studies that they are particularly excellent examples of research; therefore, if I write anything here that even remotely resembles a criticism of these two books, I hope readers will understand that it can scarcely detract from their merits.

In the acknowledgements section of Driscoll's *The New Literary Middlebrow*, she acknowledges three book industry professionals: 'Lisa Dempster, Director of the Melbourne Writers Festival; Sam Twyford-Moore, Director of the Emerging Writers Festival; [and] Tess Brady, Chair of Creative Clunes Inc.' (vi). *The New Literary Middlebrow* contains an entire chapter titled 'The Middlebrow Pleasures of Literary Festivals', and Driscoll writes at length about the three festivals operated by these three literary festival directors, but she does not mention them even once in the body of her book, much less quote them. The presence of their names in the acknowledgements section suggests that they aided Driscoll in some fashion – perhaps by granting her an interview – but if that is the case, readers are left guessing as to which of Driscoll's many valuable insights might be traced back to a helpful comment by an industry professional.

In the acknowledgements section of Murray's *The Adaptation Industry*, she acknowledges a long list of what she calls 'book- and screen-industry professionals' (xv). One of the names in this list belongs to an author, but the other thirteen names occupy what has previously been described as the bridging state between a book's origins with the author and its endings with readers. In other words, they are industry professionals. Furthermore, it is clear that Murray conducted interviews with at least some of them because these interviews appear in the references list at the end of the book. However, only three of these thirteen industry professionals can actually be found in the body of the book. (Three other names appear in both the acknowledgements and the endnotes but not in the body of the book.) One of the three industry professionals that can actually be found in the body of the book (Julian Friedmann of the Blake Friedmann literary agency in London) has an interview included in the references list, but his only mention in the body of the book is ascribed to a different source. That means only two interviews made their way into the body of Murray's 253-page book. One interview subject (Nerrilee Weir of Random House Australia) is mentioned or quoted just once. The other interview subject (Ion Trewin of the Man Booker Prizes) is mentioned or quoted three times.

Of course, any judgement about Driscoll's and Murray's choice not to acknowledge their debt to such sources, in contrast to Thompson's foregrounding of interviews, must consider the difference in each work's stated intentions and its research design. I cannot fairly criticise other scholars for writing the book *they* want to write, rather than the book *I* want them to have written. Nonetheless, there is one other element that is absent from

Driscoll's and Murray's work that I believe merits a mention. Specifically, there is nothing that would suggest that book industry professionals are anything less than thoroughly professional – certainly not that they bear a resemblance to fans or 'ordinary' readers.

This omission marks a point of difference from Thompson and others who, as previously mentioned, paint a picture of literary agents, editors, and publishers as 'ordinary' readers that get really excited about books. For example, in an eight-page section titled "Representing Writers Seamlessly around the World": Hooper, Wylie and *A Child's Book of True Crime*, this is how Driscoll describes the process by which author Chloe Hooper secured her first literary agent, Andrew Wylie: 'Wylie read the writing sample, accepted Hooper as a client the same day, and proceeded to arrange single-book publishing deals in 15 countries' (63). By way of contrast, here's a newspaper article on the same subject: 'That night Wylie phoned and said he loved what he'd read' ('Triumph of Perversity'). And here's another newspaper article: 'Despite [Wylie's] reputation, Jane Palfreyman says, he wasn't just interested in the money. "We weren't the highest bidder ... Agents are more interested in matching a book to a particular publisher or editor with the right strengths and enthusiasms"' ('Advance to Where?'). Clearly, some sources choose to foreground 'love' and 'enthusiasm' as traits possessed by (or feelings expressed by) book industry professionals, whereas others do not.

One possible reason why so many scholars of twenty-first-century publishing studies, like Driscoll and Murray, choose not to discuss or acknowledge both interviews and publishing professionals' status as enthusiastic 'ordinary' readers is because of their reliance on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production features prominently in Driscoll's and Murray's books, as it does in the writings of many of their peers. Of particular interest to this conversation, Bourdieu 'rejects the traditional notion that what he calls "tastes" (that is, consumer preferences) are the result of innate, individualistic choices of the human intellect. He argues that this "Kantian aesthetic" fails to recognise that tastes are socially conditioned' (Allen and Anderson 70). Indeed, Driscoll echoes this sentiment: 'Individuals are influenced by their position in the field and their habitus, both of which may be middlebrow. In addition, individual behaviour is also heavily influenced by field-wide forces' (13). There is obvious merit to Bourdieu's position on the subject, but it is possible that one of the unintended consequences of this theoretical position is that researchers devalue the statements of individual subjects. Consequently, if a scholar of twenty-first-century publishing studies interviews a publishing professional who says that she agreed to publish a book because it resonated with her personal experience, the scholar is unlikely to quote from this interview – thus depriving readers of the opportunity to see the publishing professional as an 'ordinary' reader – but rather examine the 'field-wide forces' that have led to this particular book being published at this particular moment in time.

Driscoll and Murray clearly recognise the value of interviewing publishing professionals as part of their research. Moreover, it is hardly necessary to convince anyone reading the special issue of this journal that interviewing publishing professionals could

contribute valuable insights to almost any twenty-first-century publishing studies research project. However, based on off-the-record (and admittedly anecdotal) conversations with many of my scholarly peers, I have observed that scholars of twenty-first-century publishing studies tend to use interviews in one of two ways: 1. to confirm things they already know to be true, or 2. to provide them with leads or insights that they can then explore using other methodologies, usually without crediting the initial lead or insight. In both cases, scholars of twenty-first-century publishing studies are undervaluing interviews with publishing professionals as a research methodology available to them.

For the record, I am guilty of this, too. While writing my PhD dissertation about Australian book publishing, for example, I interviewed nearly 50 publishing professionals and mentioned all of them in the acknowledgements section, but very few of these interviews actually made their way into the body of my dissertation (Henningsgaard, *Outside*). One of my reasons for doing so was because I perceived my interview subjects to be inherently biased; their recollections of events could not be trusted – they had grown so accustomed to exaggerating an author’s book sales, for example, that they believed the lie themselves – and too often they were merely repeating industry wisdom that no one had ever bothered to objectively evaluate – for example, if a book is ‘too Australian’, it will not sell overseas. Consequently, I took the leads or insights offered by my interview subjects and explored them using other methodologies, usually without crediting the initial lead or insight. I was not wrong to try to verify publishing professionals’ claims using other methodologies, but it is this article’s contention that I did my research a disservice by undervaluing interviews with publishing professionals as a research methodology.

Case study

In 2018, I travelled to New York City in order to interview editors and publishers about their experiences acquiring the rights to books originally published in Australia. While I was there, I also interviewed literary agents who had facilitated these agreements. I am interested in the various ways in which Australian books find their way into the North American marketplace. This particular research experience prompted me to rethink the sidelining of interviews within my research outputs. It is not simply that, on this occasion, my interview subjects provided me with insights that would not have been otherwise available to me; they certainly did this, but that has happened to me before. Rather, a complex web of factors led to the following three realisations about the value of foregrounding interviews with publishing professionals:

First, the sources mentioned in a research output help to signal its intended readership. It is why scholars are encouraged to cite articles from the journal to which they are submitting – not just because the journal’s editors are narcissistic, but because the presence of these citations signal to the journal’s readers (including peer reviewers, who are its first readers) that this article is relevant to them. When a source moves from the references list or the acknowledgements page to the body of the text, it speaks more loudly;

it more clearly hails its intended readership. Weber and Mannion write in their essay 'Discipline and Publish':

Publishing studies is, as a discipline, most productive where ... *cultural critique* exists in close proximity to both *industry-centric* and *practice-led* research. When these [three] different strands of publishing's research culture remain in dialogue, the conversation they inspire is one that includes publishers, teachers, students, and researchers. Thus conceived, publishing studies is not simply a discipline that speaks about the publishing industry; rather, it is a discipline that speaks with and to and about, and even for the industry. (202, emphasis added)

For scholars of twenty-first-century publishing studies – unlike scholars of many other aspects of book history – the potential is there to address both their fellow scholars and practitioners. Foregrounding interviews within a research output more clearly signals to publishing professionals that they are part of the intended readership.

One example of a publishing professional reading the research output of a scholar of twenty-first-century publishing studies involves Amy Louise Maynard's PhD dissertation, *A Scene in Sequence: Australian Comics Production as a Creative Industry, 1975–2017*. Maynard interviewed twenty-five comics industry professionals as part of her research, and one of these individuals later reported to me about her dissertation, 'Yeah, it's got good stuff in it! I have quibbles but I'm in the subject group so, y'know'. Clearly, this individual's status as an interview subject informed his decision to read a substantial portion of Maynard's 264-page dissertation. Other interview subjects might only perform an Internet search and read the relevant sections about themselves. Publishing professionals who were not interviewed might read only, for example, the section in Maynard's dissertation devoted to 'strategic practices ... to strengthen and expand social network markets', which has the greatest potential to inform their business practices (228). Considering the pressure currently put on scholars to develop industry connections and perform 'demand-driven research' that explores issues and solves problems relevant to industry, any level of engagement by publishing professionals with the university must be viewed positively.

Clearly, I agree with Weber and Mannion's assertion that 'it is of strategic and pragmatic importance that publishing studies research remains relevant to the industry' (200). One way to ensure continued relevancy is for scholars of twenty-first-century publishing studies to ask the right research questions. Interviews with publishing professionals have the potential to generate 'authentic' research questions (in other words, research questions that publishing professionals themselves would like answers to) so that scholars are not producing research that simply confirms things publishing professionals already know to be true. This is the second reason why it is valuable to foreground interviews within research outputs: if interviews with publishing professionals are foregrounded, thus signalling to publishing professionals that they are part of the intended

readership, the researcher is more likely to receive feedback that alerts him or her to the kinds of questions publishing professionals have about the research topic. This can very quickly become a virtuous cycle in which foregrounding interviews gets more industry engagement, which yields new industry-relevant research questions, which leads to research outputs that are of even greater interest to publishing professionals.

I experienced a condensed version of this phenomenon when I interviewed a literary agent in New York City who represents a number of Australian writers. I told him about an earlier phase of the same research project, in which I had interviewed publishing professionals in Australia about how they sell their books into the American marketplace. This literary agent asked me what kinds of things they had said, and I related to him a quote from the publisher at a Melbourne-based independent publishing house. This publisher had claimed that American publishing houses prefer to acquire Australian books well in advance of their Australian publication date – while these books are still in the editorial stage – because American editors feel compelled to leave their mark on a book, whether it needs it or not, in order to advance their own career in a hyper-competitive local industry. The American literary agent responded, ‘Well, that’s just ridiculous. That’s not the reason. It’s because Australian books aren’t edited to the same degree as American books. Australian books are under-edited’. And right there I had a brand-new research question – ‘Could that be true?’ – that came about in direct response to another publishing professional. The literary agent was not contesting the validity of my research or conclusions, which is something he may not have felt comfortable doing. Instead, he was engaging in a friendly debate with an industry peer – something he, no doubt, felt both qualified and invited to do. The prominent inclusion of a quotation from an interview with a fellow publishing professional opened the door to additional feedback and, in the process, generated a new research question.

The third and final reason why it is valuable to foreground interviews within research outputs is yet another example of the virtuous cycle. Interviews with publishing professionals can potentially lead to access to different kinds of documents that are sadly underrepresented as research material in the field of twenty-first-century publishing studies. For example, one of Australia’s most prominent literary agents showed me the pitch materials she had written for a novel by an Australian writer that she was pitching to American publishers. When I later spoke with the American editor at a Big Five publishing house who contracted this novel, I mentioned to her that I had seen these pitch materials, so she pulled out the publishing house’s marketing materials for the same book. A comparison of these two documents has proved very fruitful. Scholars of twenty-first-century publishing studies very rarely cite this type of material, presumably because they have not been given access to it. There are, obviously, sensitivities involved in negotiating who is given access to this type of information, just as using interviews involves a great deal of negotiation. In commercial contexts, this is even more sensitive. Certainly, my insider-outsider status as a former publishing professional – I used to work as an editor at a multinational publishing house in New York City – may have contributed to the decision to

grant me access to these documents. However, I suspect that my status as a non-competitive academic, which is a status I share with all other scholars of twenty-first-century publishing studies, had much more to do with this decision. By foregrounding interviews and explicitly acknowledging when this type of material has been received, it encourages more of the same behaviour by industry professionals. Clearly, interviewing literary agents, editors, and publishers can be about much more than simply engaging with their narrated experiences and memories of *reading*; for the researcher, there can be a utilitarian element to it that matches the publishing professional's (sometimes) utilitarian approach to the act of reading a manuscript.

As has been previously suggested, scholars are under increasing pressure to make connections with industry as well as community, thereby demonstrating 'impact'. Interviews are a way of creating networks, laying the groundwork for future student internships, and so much more. They also have the potential to promote 'reverse engagement' by helping industry professionals better understand the benefits of academic research and, thus, increase their desire to develop professional connections with universities. I am hopeful that I will experience some of these benefits as a result of the interviews I conducted with American publishing professionals who have contributed to the publication of local editions of books originally published in Australia, but it is too soon after conducting the interviews to draw any conclusions; most of these benefits take time to develop.

Limitations

Of course, there are limitations to interview-centred approaches – limitations that apply to collecting and analysing both *readers'* talk about reading and *publishing professionals'* talk about books more generally. Acknowledging these limitations will hopefully inform how interviews are used more broadly across reception and audience studies. An apt demonstration of one of these limitations can be found in a body of research that tries to compile evidence related to publishing's cultural role in order to inform decisions about the public funding of the arts.

The public funding of the arts in Australia is a topic that has received considerable attention by scholars (Throsby, 'Public'). This type of scholarship is meant to evaluate Australian cultural policy – its historical contours, its efficacy, the likelihood that we will ever again have a government that cares about such things. Among the many and varied art forms and cultural policies that have been evaluated by scholars is a body of Australian cultural policy about publishing. For at least the last couple decades, scholars have been researching the evolution of this policy. I remember, when I was a PhD candidate, reading Kath McLean's magisterial PhD dissertation, submitted in 2002 to Monash University and titled *Culture, Commerce and Ambivalence: A Study of Australian Federal Government Intervention in Book Publishing*. More recently, in the book *Publishing Means Business*, David Throsby authored an essay titled 'Commerce or Culture? Australian Book Industry Policy in the Twenty-First Century'. Throsby writes, 'In this paper we examine the evolution of policy towards the book industry in Australia over the last decade, and assess the extent

to which changing policy settings have affected the industry' ('Commerce', 11). This statement is representative of the aspirations that can be ascribed to the body of scholarship from which it emerged.

The research that goes into this type of scholarship is designed to *evaluate* Australian cultural policy about publishing, but of course there is also research that directly *informs* this policy – either shaping the terms of its funding or justifying its continued existence. Some examples of this type of research are commissioned specifically to inform cultural policy, while other examples have different origin stories but are later leveraged for the same purpose. Some examples are produced by academic researchers, while others are produced by the cultural policymakers themselves or by committees of representatives from the affected industries. Despite this diversity, there are certain established (usually unspoken) conventions to the research that informs Australian cultural policy about publishing, and these conventions structure the operation of the publishing industry by influencing the inner and outer workings of the field. Indeed, a retired rights manager for an Australian publishing house remarked to me, 'Those policies and funding decisions can make or break a book, or even a whole slate of books. They can determine what gets published and what doesn't'.

One of the most common features of the research that tries to compile evidence related to publishing's cultural role is its methodological preference for interviews. Interviews are, of course, a potentially valuable research methodology. Ironically, even when they are routinely used, as for the preparation of cultural policy documents, the method could be better developed. Researchers' ability to identify a *representative sample* of interview subjects is of particular concern. For example, in 2017, the 'Western Australian (WA) Writing Sector Review Final Report and Recommendations' observed, 'There are at least six active publishers based in WA – Fremantle Press, Magabala Books, Margaret River Press, UWA Publishing, Gestalt Publishing and Hesperian Press' (10). Notably, these are all trade publishing houses. But other publishing houses call Western Australia home, including RIC Publications, which is an educational publishing house that also happens to be the largest of its kind in Australia with offices in six countries. RIC Publications has more than thirty employees in its Perth office, which is more employees than all other Western Australian publishing houses combined. Yet it is completely overlooked in this report, even though the report's mandate is to provide a review of the 'writing sector in Western Australia' – not any particular segment of this 'writing sector'. The report also overlooks micro-publishers specialising in genre fiction, like Ticonderoga Publications (science fiction, fantasy, and horror), Serenity Press (folklore, fairy tales, and myth), and Twelfth Planet Press (science fiction, fantasy, horror, and crime). Notably, some of these publishers produce more new titles per year than publishers that feature in the report.

Authoritative sources on the subject of book publishing regularly use the phrases 'all types of publishing' and 'different types of publishing' in an exclusively anecdotal fashion, with implicit criteria that seem to vary from source to source. There is no general agreement about how exactly the industry is best segmented – or, to put it another way, what

segments most accurately represent industry dynamics. This makes it incredibly difficult – nay, impossible – to identify a representative sample of interview subjects.

Therefore, I have developed three distinct models for surveying the different types of publishing houses: a model based on funding source, a model based on market segment, and a model based on size (Henningsgaard, ‘Types’). Each of these three models represents a particularly useful, internally coherent model for surveying all the different types of publishing houses. Each model contains three categories (for example, a model based on funding source contains the categories ‘traditional’, ‘dependent’, and ‘self-publishing’), and any category from one model could intersect with virtually any category in the other two models. With the establishment of a set of internally coherent (rather than anecdotal) models, it is finally possible to approach the task of identifying a representative sample of interview subjects.

It is also possible to analyse the previously discussed examples of research that has informed Australian cultural policy about publishing, in order to identify which types of publishing houses tend to get overlooked or under-sampled when this research relies on interviews. The determining factor seems to be the personal and professional investments of the researchers and/or their advisory groups. For example, the Book Industry Collaborative Council membership included the directors of both Melbourne University Publishing and Monash University Publishing, so it is no great surprise that this is one of the few reports that lists ‘scholarly book publishing’ as a ‘priority issue’ and devoted twenty-six of its 250 pages to the findings of its ‘scholarly book publishing expert reference group’ (‘Book Industry Collaborative Council Final Report’). This expert reference group conducted a disproportionately high number of interviews with publishing professionals working in the category of ‘academic and professional publishing’, which is one of the three categories in the model based on market segment (the other two are ‘trade publishing’ and ‘educational publishing’).

Using these models and their constituent categories, it is possible to account for the diversity of responses I received when interviewing American literary agents, editors, and publishers about their experiences acquiring the rights to books originally published in Australia. For example, an editor at a Big Five publishing house (not the same one mentioned earlier in this article) asserted that, when he is making an acquisitions decision involving a previously published book, ‘it’s very important that the book was a bestseller in its home territory [i.e., Australia]’. Meanwhile, the previously mentioned editor in chief of an independent publishing house said, ‘Australian sales aren’t a big deal’. The differences in their responses to this interview question can be attributed to the different categories to which they belong in the model based on size. Indeed, subsequent interviews with other editors and publishers operating in these two categories confirmed this hypothesis.

Of course, it would be possible to further segment these types of publishing houses; slicing the industry into increasingly smaller pieces would reveal, for example, that within the market segment of academic and professional publishing – a type of publishing that is united in its focus on a market or audience of expert readers – academic publishing is much

more frequently interviewed as compared to professional publishing, which is completely absent from these reports. Furthermore, within the market segment of trade publishing, genre publishers are less likely to be interviewed.

It must be concluded, then, that one of the conventions of the research that informs Australian cultural policy about publishing is its methodological preference for interviews that are problematically unrepresentative of industry dynamics. Nonetheless, for those researchers who conduct interviews with publishing professionals such as literary agents, editors, and publishers, overcoming this limitation is at least within their reach. Any such claim pertaining to researchers who conduct interviews with 'ordinary' readers should be regarded sceptically. It is so difficult for these researchers to identify a representative sample of interview subjects that even the most foundational and important monographs working in the tradition of reading or reception studies – for example, Janice A Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* and Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* – have simply thrown up their arms and admitted defeat:

It is clear that the Smithton group cannot be thought of as a scientifically designed random sample. The conclusions drawn from the study, therefore, should be extrapolated only with great caution to apply to other romance readers. (Radway 48)

Agitators usually managed to record their lives in some form, with the result that our whole sample is actually skewed to the political left: the Burnett–Vincent–Mayall bibliography lists many more Communists than Conservatives. (Rose 2)

While the researchers who use interviews with publishing professionals are similarly using samples with limited representativeness (like Radway and Rose did), there are different opportunities for these two types of researchers going into the future – not least based on their approach to sampling.

Conclusion

There are clearly opportunities for researchers of publishing studies and researchers of reading or reception studies to learn from each other and improve their research as a result. Perhaps most significantly, publishing studies scholars could learn from researchers of reading to better recognise and appreciate the possibilities represented by interviews with publishing professionals – and what might be gained by foregrounding this particular research methodology.

Publishing studies scholars could also learn from the actual research outcomes produced by researchers of reading, especially when these research outcomes have been informed by interviews. After all, as has been demonstrated in this article, publishing studies

scholars would benefit from a better understanding of those moments when publishing professionals act like ‘ordinary’ readers; the research outcomes produced by researchers of reading can help identify these behaviours and distinguish them from publishing professionals’ more ‘professional’ engagement with books and the act of reading. Publishing professionals need to act like or draw on the reading behaviours of ‘ordinary’ readers in order to anticipate what will appeal to readers, how to market a particular book, and so forth. But publishing professionals also have ‘genuine’, emotional responses to the things they read – love, empathy, anger, and so forth. It is worth mentioning, as well, that not all publishing professionals are equal in this respect; individuals with particular job titles (or in certain departments, or at certain levels, or in certain publishing houses) are afforded more opportunities to indulge their status as ‘ordinary’ readers. Publishing studies scholars could benefit from giving serious consideration to the reading histories of publishing professionals and asking interview questions that position them like fans or ‘ordinary’ readers in reading studies.

Indeed, it seems appropriate to conclude here with a quote from an interview I conducted with a literary agent based in Western Australia. He asked me what I was working on, and I told him a little about this article. He said to me, ‘I’m happy to talk to anyone about what it is I do, but you’re the first academic who has ever asked. And I’d be happy to read any academic research about publishing, but only if I can see some benefit in it for me’. This sounds to me like an invitation. I, for one, plan to accept, and I hope my fellow scholars of publishing studies will too.

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