

# Small Publishers and the Emerging Network of Australian Literary Prosumption

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**T**HIS ARTICLE EXAMINES RECENT DEBATES AROUND THE DECLINE OF Australian literary production, focusing on the various methods used by Mark Davis, David Carter and Katherine Bode to quantify literary publishing activity. Following this analysis, the article surveys Australian literary production in 2012 in order to make four key claims: 1) a fundamental shift has occurred in the mediation of literary production, which is now principally undertaken by small and independent publishers; 2) this shift in mediation has profoundly affected the *audience* for most literary works, which now circulate amongst a smaller readership who have some stake in the *production* of literature as authors or mediators; 3) this contemporary form of literary ‘prosumption’ resembles the mode of literary production of the avant-garde as described by Pierre Bourdieu; 4) while this network of prosumption may appear insular, the complex social position of ‘authorship’, as noted by Bernard Lahire, means that literary culture brings together a network of agents who might otherwise remain unconnected.

## I. Quantifying the ‘Decline’ of Australian Literature

Modern accounts of literary decline are at least as old as Hegel’s assertion that art ‘is and remains for us a thing of the past’ (11), and polemics about the ‘decline’ of

Australian letters have been more or less a fixture of national literary discourse since World War Two (Bode 57-8). But in the last decade, a new debate about literary decline—sparked by Mark Davis’s article ‘The Decline of the Literary Paradigm in Australian Publishing’, which was originally published in the literary journal *HEAT* in 2006—has sought to quantify and measure Australian literary production. Whereas most ‘decline polemics’, to use Ben Etherington’s term, examine individual works that are seen as indicative of a larger cultural decay, the current debate differs in focusing on the material conditions under which works of literature are brought to market rather than on questions of literary quality as such; Davis’s claims rely on a ‘systems’ view of literature as an institution shaped by the commercial realities of the book trade, which has itself been transformed by larger socio-political and economic forces.

For Davis, contemporary literature is in decline because Australian publishing has transformed into ‘an information industry’, which views itself in economic terms with the result that publishers now expect *all books* to make a profit (124-6). This shift undermined the post-war ‘literary paradigm’, under whose auspices unprofitable literary works were cross-subsidised by commercial titles (119). Although they rarely broke even, literary titles were produced by large publishers because literature’s symbolic capital—fostered by ‘Leavisite’ tertiary institutions and the broader ‘post-1950s cultural nationalist moment’—also legitimised publishers’ more commercial endeavours (127). But contemporary publishers, who focus on profit above all else, are no longer ‘aggressively seeking or promoting new literary fiction’, a shift Davis links to a broader, neoliberal privatisation of the public sphere (120).

Unsurprisingly, these claims have been questioned by a number of critics. In ‘Diagnosing the Death of Literature’ (2007), for example, Nathan Hollier accuses Davis of an anti-literary, market determinism that ignores government subsidy’s role in fostering local literary production. Andrew McCann, in ‘Lives of the Publishers’ (2013), suggests that the ‘decline’ narrative reflects a nostalgia for twentieth-century progressive publishers like Grove Press. In their survey of contemporary Australian literature, *After the Celebration* (2009), Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman simply assert that ‘There has been no decline in Australian literary publishing’ (4). But quantitative investigations undertaken by David Carter, Katherine Bode, and Davis himself have all substantiated, to varying degrees, the claim that there has been a marked decline at least in a certain type of literary production.

While these studies note the same downward trend in literary publishing, their estimates of the decline have differed significantly: Davis notes a drop of over 50 percent (120), Bode finds a reduction of 22 percent (85), and Carter records a decrease of 31 percent (‘Boom, Bust’ 239). Indeed, statistics on Australian

publishing are so notoriously unreliable that even estimates of the size of the local industry fluctuate greatly,<sup>1</sup> but these varying estimates of literary decline reflect different methodological approaches to harvesting information from the AustLit database. Whereas Davis focused only on large publishers and ‘manually excluded’ examples of ‘[n]on-literary popular fiction’ (380), Carter and Bode rely on the AustLit’s internal metadata.

On the face of it, Davis’s methodology appears both more subjective (because he applies his own criteria) and less comprehensive (since he focuses only on large publishers). But neither does relying on AustLit’s internal categorisation necessarily produce clear or comprehensive results; since AustLit records no ‘literary’ category, tracking literary titles in the database is an oblique process of excluding novels that have been tagged with generic designations, such as ‘romance’ or ‘fantasy.’<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as Carter himself notes, AustLit’s categories aren’t applied consistently (‘Boom, Bust’ 237)—an inevitable and unavoidable outcome of AustLit’s admirable determination to catalogue and classify the totality of ‘Australian literary, print and narrative cultures’ (AustLit).

Relying solely on AustLit’s internal taxonomy to compile a list of recent literary works would, for example, omit Courtney Collins’ *The Burial* (2012, listed as ‘crime’ in the AustLit database), despite its being shortlisted for The Stella Prize, the Nita May Dobbie Award, and the UTS Award for New Writing in the New South Wales Premier’s Awards. A strict adherence to AustLit’s categorisation would even omit Anna Funder’s *All That I Am* (2011, listed in AustLit as ‘historical fiction’), although it appeared on the lists of seventeen different literary prizes and won the Miles Franklin Award and eight other awards. At the same time, Randa Abdel-Fattah’s *No Sex in the City* (2012) and Nicki Reed’s *Unzipped* (2012) would both be deemed ‘literary’ according to this approach, since they are listed simply as ‘novels’ in AustLit, even though both are clearly aligned with the commercial genre that is frequently described as ‘chick-lit’—a categorisation substantiated by the paratextual framing of these works in reviews, on their publishers’ websites and on social reading sites, such as Goodreads.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The last reliable figures appeared in 2004, when the Australian Bureau of Statistics performed a survey of the sector. More recent estimates have relied on incomplete or indirect data. Lee et al. estimated the size of the industry in 2009 at between \$1.738 and \$2.0 billion dollars (19). The Book Industry Strategy Group estimated the size of the 2010 book industry at \$2.3 billion (1). Here, there is a variance of more than \$500 million dollars.

<sup>2</sup> Carter tracks the category of ‘novels’ and then subtracts all works that have been assigned a genre tag (such as romance or crime) in the database with the exception of novels that have been tagged as ‘historical fiction’ (‘Boom, Bust’ 237); this approach also inevitably includes a great deal of commercial fiction that would not normally be considered ‘literary’. Bode, on the other hand, appears to exclude *all* novels with genre tags in the AustLit database (85-6).

<sup>3</sup> Text Publishing uses the five following keywords to describe Reed’s *Unzipped* on their website: Fiction, Australian, Romance, Erotica, Women’s Fiction. Diane Dempsey in her 21 July 2012 review of the novel also describes it as ‘chick lit... with a bit of class.’ On the Goodreads page for

My point in raising the issue of method is to underscore a necessary caution about the limitations of quantitative research, which, as John Frow has argued, threatens to turn genres ‘into black boxes . . . whose inner workings’ remain elusive (‘Midlevel’ 241-42). Categorising works according to explicit criteria—whether reliant on metadata or not—ignores the fact that genres are not objective categories given in advance, but comprise an ‘a priori order that can be defined only a posteriori’, which must be excavated through interpretative reading (Frow, ‘On Midlevel Concepts’ 243). Such categorisation is doubly problematic when applied to the literary, since, as Alastair Fowler notes, literature—when construed in its broadest manifestation—is not a genre or even ‘a class at all’, but ‘an aggregate’ of related social practices that lack any unifying principle (3).

And yet, Davis, Carter, and Bode all presuppose such a category in referring to the ‘literary novel’ as a definable form. Here, the notion of the ‘literary’—although it lacks the characteristic tropes and themes associated with established genres—appears to function like a *mode*. Modes suggests a quality or tone and take on an ‘adjectival’ form that ‘conveys no information’ about the ‘external form’ of a work (Fowler 102-3). But while the ‘literary’ is often used adjectively, ‘literariness’ has no particular qualities or tones that function like those of other modes. This problem of definition is only deferred by relying on notions of literary language, a concept that has also been disputed since the term ‘literature’ gained a specialised meaning early in the nineteenth century (Tambling 7-8).

What characterises the literary, if one accepts Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy’s account of Romanticism as the moment of the ‘theoretical institutionalization’ of ‘literature itself’ (3), is not a belonging to some larger category, but rather the literary work’s refusal of all categorisation in favour of its essential uniqueness. As Blanchot has described it, ‘the essence of literature is precisely to escape any essential determination, any assertion that stabilizes it or even realizes it; it is never already there, it always has to be rediscovered or reinvented’ (201). Literary texts—in this specific sense—are not generic, but anti-generic. Even when they seem to invoke explicit generic traits, they perform the unworking of their apparent genre in the act of revealing their particularity. Here, the commonplace distinction between ‘literary’ and ‘genre’ works is maintained, but in a different sense: literary works are not simply opposed to ‘genre fiction’ (science-fiction, romance etc.) but rather to the neoclassical conception of genre itself; the literary text invokes a genre while in the act of dissolving it. This conception of the literary—which requires attending to the particularity of texts—can never be captured by quantitative analysis.

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Abdel-Fattah’s *No Sex in the City*, most readers have opted to categorise the novel as ‘Women’s Fiction > Chick Lit’ (‘No Sex in the City’).

And yet, while literature's refusal to adhere to abstract categories complicates the deployment of quantitative analyses, it does not render them irrelevant. Here, the Blanchotian notion of 'the text as having two sides' provides a useful framework for understanding the value of such accounts: while the literary work has one side rooted in culture, the other side 'speaks only in its own voice, and in so doing resists our attempt to conceptualize it' (Haase and Large 14). While Blanchot's claim that literary texts undermine their genres is important, the culturally determined nature of texts also cannot be ignored, because, as Frow argues, sociological analyses of the literary—including quantitative accounts—provide an essential vantage point that undermines 'the apparent coherence of the literary' by revealing its embedment within a social and cultural structure that is neither universal nor given ('Midlevel' 242).

In order to achieve this perspective, quantitative accounts must rely on necessary abstractions from social and institutional 'literary' praxis, which comprises a multiplicity of different acts and events, including tertiary modes of literary instruction, the staging of literary festivals, the awarding of literary prizes, the creation and dissemination of book reviews, the implementation of publishers' marketing strategies, and even the shelving practices of booksellers, who physically sort individual works into different categories or genres—which is to say nothing of the literary networks that are being formed, reinforced, or altered through social media and other digital communications technology. From a sociological perspective, functionalist definitions of genre—although they inevitably fail to capture the richness and complexity of the social—are useful precisely because they derive from practice. It is in this sense that reliance on the taxonomy of AustLit seems particularly problematic, because the database's internal rubric is most likely informed by only one specific set of scholarly practices that—although they also serve a culturally intermediating function—necessarily differ from other modes of literary praxis.

My point here is to reaffirm Frow's 'radical suggestion' not to obsess over 'matters of taxonomic substance... to which there are never any correct answers', and instead to approach issues of classification only in relation to their specific social, cultural and economic circumstances (*Genre* 55). In what follows, I want to return to the question of tracking literary works, not in an attempt to quantify the totality of Australian literary production, but instead to test the 'decline' hypothesis in a different register. What I will seek to propose is not that literature is declining in simple terms, but rather that there has been a fundamental shift in the *mediators* of Australian literary production. In tracking this shift, which, as I will argue, reveals that small and independent publishers have become the primary agents for disseminating Australian literary works, I want to trace the broader implications for an Australian literary culture that is increasingly removed from

more popular, and, indeed, populist modes of commercial publishing. This shift in the mediators of Australian literature has profound effects on authors, readers, and the broader network of literary production within Australia, and, in so doing, might alter the conception of literature itself.

## **II. Small Publishers and Australian Literary Production**

In order to analyse the contemporary changes in the mediation of book-length Australian literature, I have tracked the 2012 output of large Australian publishers and many of the most established small and independent publishers. I have employed a method very similar to Davis's, generating a list of titles from the AustLit database and publishers' websites, and then manually excluding titles that were not literary. Here, my deployment of the category was informed not by subjective judgments of quality but was rather based on distinctions that reflected everyday practice. With regard to specific texts, I sought to determine whether a given title was marketed as 'literary' or 'popular fiction' by its publisher and how the work had been categorised by booksellers, reviewers, literary prize lists, and social reading sites. Given the time-consuming nature of manual selection, I have restricted my analysis to 2012. Further data collection would be required to substantiate definitively the shifts I am noting, but my analysis accords with general trends noted by Davis, Carter and Bode, although it does suggest that the rate of literary decline has plateaued.

While I think manual selection of this kind creates the most accurate data set of 'literary' texts, it is essential to note that other data-collecting techniques have revealed important trends that are obscured by manual selection. Bode, for example, has noted the growth of self-published titles that may be literary, which my analysis does not capture. Similarly, Carter has recently argued that there is a resurgence of fiction publishing buoyed by the expansion of what he terms 'a broader middle ground crossing genre fiction, "good commercial fiction" and "general fiction"' ('General Fiction'). Following Carter's insights, one could even argue that at least two, rival notions of literature currently circulating, comprising 1) works within the traditional genres (the novel, short stories, poetry, some non-fiction) associated with literary writing, and 2) a new class of populist or popular (depending on your viewpoint) genres that are being infused with literary devices and techniques that historically have been associated with 'high cultural' works. For my purposes, however, I am interested in tracking the publication of those literary texts in the first category that have traditionally been deemed symbolically and culturally important, but which, as Ivor Indyk has argued, have always been—and still remain—largely unsuccessful as commodities in the marketplace (125).

The key finding of my survey, which supports one of Davis's own predictions, is that there has been a significant shift in the mediation of Australian literary works, which are now primarily disseminated by small and independent Australian publishers, instead of large publishers. This may seem an odd claim on the face of it, since titles from large publishers regularly appear in the fiction shortlists of major prizes. But these lists mask the shallowness of large publishers' investments in literature: while large houses continue to publish established literary writers, who are saleable commodities and likely to win prizes, they are usually only interested in emerging writers who work in defined, commercial niches or have a compelling personal story that is easy to sell. So-called 'mid-list' Australian authors, however, are now published almost entirely by the small press. Indeed, large publishers' lack of investment in literature is clear in their general disregard for unprofitable forms of literary writing: single-author collections of short fiction, with a few notable exceptions, are almost entirely produced by small publishers (Stinson, 'Same Boat' 93),<sup>4</sup> and no large publisher has produced new poetry collections with any regularity since the 1990s.

My survey of the seven large publishers in Australia (now six, after the Random House merger with Penguin) concluded that they had produced only 27 new titles that could be deemed literary works originating in Australia—one fewer than the number Davis saw produced by such publishers in 2006. While this might suggest that literary production has held steady at the major houses over the last eight years, such a conclusion ignores the rise of more flexible publishing arrangements and ebook-only imprints (such as Pan Macmillan's Momentum) which have likely increased their overall production of titles; indeed, the overall number of individual titles produced in Australia appears to have more than tripled from 8,602 in 2004 to 28,234 in 2014.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, literary publishing probably accounts for an even smaller fraction of titles at major houses than it did in 2006.

Regardless, it is clear that literary publishing comprises only a tiny proportion of the major publishers' output. Allen & Unwin produced nine titles that were new

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that there has been a surprising resurgence of short fiction publishing among larger publishers in the last year or so, including Maxine Beneba Clarke's *Foreign Soil* (Hachette 2014), Ceridwen Dovey's *Only the Animals* (Penguin 2014), Abigail Ullman's *Hot Little Hands* (Penguin 2015), and Murray Middleton's Vogel-Prize-winning collection *When There's Nowhere Else to Run* (Allen & Unwin 2015). Here, however, the exception proves the rule that large publishers have generally abandoned short story collections in Australia.

<sup>5</sup> The 2004 figure comes from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 'Book Publishers, Australia, 2003-04'. The 2014 numbers appear in Tim Coronel, 'The Market Down Under' (4). I would suspect that much of this growth is due to the rise of self-publishing during this decade.

literary works.<sup>6</sup> Random House published seven<sup>7</sup>; Penguin published five<sup>8</sup>; Pan Macmillan<sup>9</sup> and HarperCollins<sup>10</sup> both published three. Simon & Schuster and Hachette, by my count, published no titles by Australian authors that could be deemed literary in 2012.<sup>11</sup> It is also essential to note that many of the 27 titles I included, which *could be* considered 'literary', also invoke tropes associated with commercial genres, such as the crime novel, the thriller, the rural romance, and the historical romance in a manner that may well constitute a new form of 'commercial literary fiction', to use a term Hachette has employed to describe Emilya Hall's *The Book of Summers*.

A survey of 2012 titles produced by eight of the more prominent small publishers demonstrates that large publishers are no longer the primary mediators of Australian literature. University of Queensland Press published more works of literary fiction than any large Australian publisher with nine works of literary fiction (including several short-story collections), as well as three single-author volumes of poetry.<sup>12</sup> Puncher & Wattman published three works of book-length fiction and sixteen collections of poetry.<sup>13</sup> Giramondo published four works of

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<sup>6</sup> The nine novels are Christopher Morgan's *Currawalli Street*, Paul D. Carter's *Eleven Seasons*, Belinda Castles' *Hannah & Emil*, Susan Johnson's *My Hundred Lovers*, Courtney Collins' *The Burial*, Andrew Croome's *Midnight Empire*, Mary-Rose MacColl's *In Falling Snow*, Michelle de Kretser's *Questions of Travel*, and Craig Silvey's *The Amber Amulet* (which is technically a novella).

<sup>7</sup> The seven works are M.L. Steadman's *The Light Between Oceans*, Drusilla Modjeska's *The Mountain*, Deborah Forster's *The Meaning Of Grace*, Deborah Robertson's *Sweet Old World*, Candice Bruce's *The Longing*, Thomas Keneally's *Daughters of Mars*, and Patrick White's *The Hanging Garden*.

<sup>8</sup> The five novels are Peter Carey's *The Chemistry of Tears*, Chloe Hooper's *The Engagement*, Majok Tulba's *Beneath the Darkening Sky*, Jennifer Paynter's *Mary Bennet*, and Jessica White's *Entitlement*.

<sup>9</sup> The novels are Annah Faulkner's *The Beloved*, Emily McGuire's *Fishing for Tigers*, and Carrie Tiffany's *Mateship with Birds*.

<sup>10</sup> The three works are Christopher Koch's *Lost Voices*, Sue Woolfe's *The Oldest Song in the World*, and Gary Crew's *The Architecture of Song*.

<sup>11</sup> Hannah Rocchel's *Secret of the Tides* could be considered literary although it was shortlisted in the General Fiction (i.e., non-literary) category at the Australian Book Industry Awards in 2012.

<sup>12</sup> The nine works of fiction include David Brooks's *The Conversation*, Simon Cleary's *Closer to Stone*, James Maloney's *The Tower Mill*, Noel Beddoe's *The Yalda Crossing*, Jennifer Mills's *The Rest is Weight*, Josephine Rowe's *Tarcutta Wake*, Venero Armanno's *Black Mountain*, Dylan Coleman's *Mazin Grace*, and Edwina Preston's *The Inheritance of Ivorie Hammer*. The volumes of poetry are M.T.C. Cronin's *The World Last Night*, Nicholas Powell's *Water Mirrors*, and Rosermay Dobson's *Collected Poetry*.

<sup>13</sup> The works of fiction include David Foster's *Man of Letters*, Christopher Conti's *Proofs*, and Andy Kissane's *The Swarm*. The poetry includes Toby Fitch's *Rawshook*, Peter Boyle's *Towns in the Great Desert*, Julie Chevalier's *Linen Tough as History*, Julie Chevalier's *Darger: A Sequence of Poems*, A. Frances Johnson's *The Wind-Up Birdman of Moorabool Street*, Kim Cheng Boey's *Clear Brightness*, Philip Salom's *The Well Mouth*, Phyllis Perlstone's *Thick and Thin Lines*, David Foster's *Sunset on Santorini*, Laurie Duggan's *The Collected Blue Hills*, David Mortimer's *Magic Logic*, Bonny Cassidy's *Certain Fathoms*, Tricia Dearborn's *The Ringing World*, M. A. Carter's *Keeping Carter* (which was 'edited' by Philip Salom), John Watson's *Occam's Aftershave*, and Ed Wright's *When Sky Becomes the Space Inside Your Head*.

book-length fiction, along with seven single-author collections of poetry.<sup>14</sup> UWA Publishing produced six book-length works of fiction and two collections of poetry.<sup>15</sup> Transit Lounge produced five book-length works of fiction and a single-author collection of poetry.<sup>16</sup> Fremantle Press produced five literary novels along with four books of poetry.<sup>17</sup> Text Publishing published four works of new literary fiction in 2012 plus an edited collection of literary work alongside its own line of literary classics.<sup>18</sup> Scribe published four works of literary fiction.<sup>19</sup> These eight small publishers thus produced 73 literary titles (40 works of fiction and 33 collections of poetry) in 2012, which is more than double the output of the seven major houses. This total would be significantly amplified by trawling the catalogues of the more than 100 members of the Small Press Network; the small press Ginninderra, for example, produced 58 works of fiction and poetry, most of which could probably be classified as literary. The small press' output of book-length literary publishing is complimented by an active literary journal sector, which occurs almost entirely outside of the auspices of large publishers and typically provides new and emerging authors with their first opportunity for publication.

For those unfamiliar with the book trade, this shift in the production of literature from large publishers to independent publishers may seem minor, but the relegation of literary publishing to small presses has a profound effect on the reception of literary writing throughout Australia. Indeed, as Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews have noted, cultural intermediaries, such as publishers, 'construct value, by framing how others—end consumers, as well as other market actors including other cultural intermediaries—engage with goods,

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<sup>14</sup> The four works of fiction were Gerald Murnane's *A History of Books*, Alice Melike Ulgezer's *A Memory of Salt*, Brian Castro's *Street to Street*, and Chi Vu's *Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale*. The seven volumes of poetry are Jennifer Maiden's *Liquid Nitrogen*, Alan Wearne's *Prepare the Cabin for Landing*, Lachlan Brown's *Limited Cities*, Michael Brennan's *Autoethnographic*, Michael Farrell's *Open Sesame*, Kate Fagan's *First Light*, and Vivian Smith's *Here, There and Elsewhere*.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Scourfield's *Unaccountable Hours: Three Novellas*, Kristin Henry's *All the Way Home*, John Hughes' *The Remnants*, Ian Reid's *That Untravelled World*, Anthony Macris's *Great Western Highway*, and Susan Midalia's *An Unknown Sky and Other Stories*. The volumes of poetry are Peter Rose's *Crimson Crop* and Kate Lilley's *Ladylike*.

<sup>16</sup> These works include Patrick Holland's *The Darkest Little Room*, Peter Barry's *We All Fall Down*, A.S. Patric's *Las Vegas for Vegans*, Sabhash Jaireth's *After Love*, Robert Power's *In Search of the Blue Tiger*, and Oyang Yu's *Self-Translation*.

<sup>17</sup> The works of fiction are Annabel Smith's *Whisky Charlie Foxtrot*, John Doust's *To the Highlands*, Natasha Lester's *If I Should Lose You*, Jaqueline Wright's *Red Dirt Talking*, and Tracy Farr's *The Life and Loves of Lena Gaunt*. The volumes of poetry are Mark Reid's *Looking out from Bashan: the Republic of Og*, Niall Lucy and John Kinsella's *The Ballad of Moondyne Joe*, John C. Ryan's *Two with Nature*, and Randolph Stow's *New Selected Poems*.

<sup>18</sup> The works of literary fiction published by Text are Toni Jordan's *Nine Days*, Murray Bail's *The Voyage*, Chris Flynn's *A Tiger in Eden*, Romy Ash's *Floundering*, and *Deep South: Stories from Tasmania*, edited by Ralaph Crane and Danielle Wood.

<sup>19</sup> The works of literary fiction are Ruby Murray's *Running Dogs*, Jacinta Halloran's *Pilgrimage*, Amy Espeseth's *Sufficient Grace*, and Cate Kennedy's *Like a House on Fire*.

affecting and effecting others' orientations towards those goods as legitimate' (552). In this case, small publishers' 'framing' of Australian literature matters because they have less capacity to engage with the broader public than large publishers do.

Small and independent publishers produce smaller print runs. Where a midlist or moderately successful Australian literary novel might have sold 6000 copies for a larger publisher a decade ago, literary titles for smaller publishers are lucky to achieve half of those sales. The audience shrinks yet again for single-author short story collections (in which even prize-nominated titles may not sell 1000 copies) and single-author collections of poetry (whose print runs are typically no larger than the low hundreds). Not only does this reduce authors' income, but it also decreases the potential diversity of the readership of literary works. Most small publishers will not be distributed by key retail sectors within the industry, including Discount Department Stores, such as Target, Coles and Big W, or major retailers such as Dymocks, Angus and Robertson, Collins and QBD, all of which, when taken together, account for the majority of bricks-and-mortar print sales in Australia. Instead, most small press sales occur through the independent booksellers, who are overwhelmingly located in Australia's major urban centres.

While small publishers do produce ebooks, these are a small portion of overall book sales in Australia. Some large publishers claim ebooks constitute 20 per cent of their sales, but for smaller publishers the figure appears to be much lower; as John Hunter of the small press, Hunter Publishers, has stated, 'ebooks remain a sideshow. Punters seem to have put the e-reader in storage alongside their Polaroid and VHS' ('Publishers' Perspective'). Data recently collected by Marcello Vena in Italy suggests that the long-tail of ebooks—where small publishers' titles typically reside—has grown at a much slower rate than the 'head' of the market, which includes bestsellers ('Revisiting the Long-Tail Theory'); in other words, larger publishers' share of the digital market appears to have grown more rapidly than that of small publishers. This outcome may partially result from the fact that smaller firms face significant administrative hurdles that hamper the profitability of digital titles (Stinson, 'Aggregating' 21).

Mid-sized independent publishers like Text can still occasionally reach a broader (though typically middle-class and inner-city) readership, because they have larger marketing budgets and have developed relationships with independent booksellers, but this still represents a tiny minority of literary titles. As a result, the principal outcome of this shift in the mediation of Australian literary works from large to small presses is that the potential audience for most Australian literary works is now much smaller than in the latter half of the Twentieth Century, when literary titles were produced by large publishers. While most readers of small press books probably also consume literary works from larger

publishers, it is very difficult for a small press book to get noticed by a broader audience. This is because smaller publishers rely on word of mouth, social media, community radio and the book pages of newspapers (or other reviewing outlets), all of which are channels that tend to speak to those segments of the population who are already readers of Australian literature in the first place.

Indeed, the larger publishers' move away from literary publishing suggest that readers appear to purchase and consume less 'literary' fiction than in recent decades. At the same time, however, it is important to note that literary works have rarely circulated among a large and diffuse reading public; as Wendy Griswold has noted, literature has always been 'a minority pastime' (Griswold 50) and the preserve of a small set of dedicated literary readers whose influence has been disproportionately large. Nonetheless, Griswold also cites U.S. Census data, which suggests that there has been a steep decline in the number of literary readers between the early 1980s and the early 2000s (51).

The shift in the mediation of Australian literature from large to small publishers indicates a similar decline has occurred in Australia, suggesting that the audience for contemporary Australian literature is smaller than it was for much of the second-half of the Twentieth Century, when Australian literature was distributed throughout the extensive material networks available to large publishers. Now, however, most contemporary literature effectively circulates within a hothouse of literary culture, mediated by smaller publishers whose audience would appear to be increasingly specialised and insular.

### III. Australian Literature, Prosumption and the Avant-Garde

My contention is that the shrinking of literature's audience has also been attended by a second, largely ignored fact, which has created a contemporary network of Australian literary production and reception vastly different from what existed even a decade or two ago. I want to suggest that the specialised audience reached by smaller publishers is—to a large degree—composed of readers who also have some connection to the literary sphere in the first place, as writers, editors, publishers, or those who aspire to such positions (such as students in creative writing programs, members of Writers' Centres, and the like). In other words, contemporary literary audiences are increasingly made up of prosumers who are themselves engaged in the creation or mediation of literary works.

In some respects, this shift is not quite as drastic as it might initially appear; literary consumption is always already presumptive in that reading, as a hermeneutic enterprise, is partially a creative act. As Schleiermacher famously argued, the purpose of textual interpretation is 'to understand the utterance at first just as well and then *better than* its author' (23). Here, the critical reader adds

a surplus value—an understanding of the text that surpasses the author's—to the text. While, for Schleiermacher, this surplus was grounded in a transcendental conception of the universality of texts, the notion that readers somehow complete, supplement, or—more radically—actually create the texts that they read has remained an essential component of more recent theories of interpretation, such as Roland Barthes' notion of the 'writerly' text in which the reader is 'no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text' (4) or Stanley Fish's interest in analysing 'the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time' (126). In this sense, interpretive reading always blurs the reader's 'passive' consumption of a determinate text with the 'active' production of meaning.

While there is no hard data available to substantiate my claims, there is a great deal of circumstantial evidence to suggest that, increasingly, rusted-on readers of Australian literature are producer-consumers whose investment in *reading* literary works is bound up with their own creative work. One key indicator can be found in the swelling enrolments of university creative writing courses—which have unexpectedly become one of the most important tertiary sites for the teaching of contemporary Australian literature. There has also been rapid development in non-accredited forms of creative writing instruction through local Writers' Centres, large publishers' development programs like Allen & Unwin's Faber Writing Academy, the various writing workshops and retreats offered by such smaller publishers as *Kill Your Darlings* and Busybird Publishing, and a wide array of private-sector instruction in both major urban and regional centres, such as the recently opened Creative Word Shop in Newcastle.

Alongside this growth in writing instruction, a number of tertiary programs in publishing and editing have appeared over the last fifteen years, primarily at universities in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. Many of these programs are explicitly presumptive in offering vocational subjects directed at employment in the publishing industry along with creative writing instruction. Between 2010 and 2014, I taught in Melbourne University's Publishing and Communications program, and I would estimate that nearly half of my editing students also viewed themselves as aspiring writers in some form.

Perhaps the most significant indicator of the rise of Australian literary prosumption is the rapid growth of the Emerging Writers Festival (EWF) in Melbourne. Although it began as a 'one-day zine fair in 2004' (Blanchard), the 2015 festival has eleven, fully-programmed days. The annual festival is supported by 'roadshow' events in other localities, including Sydney and Hobart in 2014, as well as another eleven-day Digital Writers Festival, which ran for the first time in February of 2015. While their focus is nominally on writing, EWF events frequently emphasise the consumption and mediation of literature, as well; the

2014 festival included the daylong event 'Emerging Editors', which examined publishing practice. In June of 2015, the EWF is running an event entitled 'Teaching Writing and Editing: A Symposium'. My suggestion is that the rapid growth of the EWF has been enabled by the fact that it foregrounds the presumptive nature of literary culture in Australia and, in so doing, has found a ready market of participants who see themselves simultaneously as readers, writers and textual mediators, and view these activities as complimentary rather than separate or competing interests. Although it has not grown as rapidly, the seventeen-year-old Newcastle Young Writers Festival (NYWF) offers a similar palette of events that frequently cross the boundaries between consumption and production; the NYWF's 'Critical Animals' series, for example, runs alongside writers' events and provides a venue for emerging cultural and literary critics.

The fact that dedicated readers of Australian literature are also frequently involved in its production complicates the traditional, top-down model of authorship. Here, literary culture appears to be walking a path already traversed by the subcultures associated with its less commercial forms, such as short fiction and poetry; John Forbes' famous description of the Australian poetry scene as 'a knife fight in a telephone booth' carries within it the assumption that poetry is the province of producer-consumers (McCooley). At the same time, my argument resonates with Wendy Griswold's claim that—although the number of occasional or casual readers may be diminishing—we are witnessing the re-emergence of a 'reading class' comprising those who elect to 'read books for pleasure on a regular basis' (67), and whose influence on print culture is pervasive. My argument modulates Griswold's by suggesting that this reading class is *also* a creative one, and, in this sense, is an inherently presumptive formation.

The term 'prosumer' was coined by Alvin Toffler in *The Third Wave: The Classic Study of Tomorrow* (1980). While many scholars have noted that presumption played an important role both in earlier modes of capitalism and in pre-capitalist economies (Ritzer and Jurgenson 14; Ross 169), contemporary forms of presumption are usually linked to both new digital technologies and neoliberal managerial practices. For example, Ritzer, Dean and Jurgenson identify seven factors that comprise the conditions of possibility for contemporary presumption: the decline of factory labour in the developed world; the rise of forms of immaterial labour and knowledge work; the adoption of practices in service industries that blur consumption and production (as exemplified by self-checkouts in supermarkets); the growth of an 'experience economy' that privileges 'immaterial experiences' over manufactured goods; the creation of technology (including the credit card and automated billing) that enables consumers to perform administrative tasks previously undertaken by employees; the 'absolutely crucial' technological shift initiated by the home computer and the internet; and the particular affinity between presumption and new media (381-

6). There can be no doubt that contemporary literary audiences partake in contemporary modes of prosumption when they order books online (whether in print or digital form), when they rate and review books on social readings sites (such as Goodreads), when they discuss books on social media (like Twitter), or when they support literary projects through crowdfunding sites, which raised \$1.2 million dollars for Australian publishing initiatives in 2014 ('Australian Crowdfunded Publishing Projects Raise \$1.2m in 2014.').

Nonetheless, I want to suggest the contemporary network of Australian literary producer-consumers, while affected by new media and technology, is just as powerfully shaped by older modes of distribution, production and consumption that are linked to the 'old media' technology of the codex. Indeed, even many obviously 'digital' literary practices, such as participation in social reading sites, often occur after a reader's consumption of a *print* artefact. In this sense, contemporary literary prosumption is post-digital, a term that, as Florian Cramer has argued, 'describes the messy state of media, arts and design after their digitisation (or at least the digitisation of crucial aspects of the channels through which they are communicated)'. I want to suggest that post-digital literary prosumption actually recalls an older mode of prosumption that Pierre Bourdieu described as characteristic of the nineteenth-century French avant-gardes.

In Bourdieu's account, avant-garde literary works were also mediated by small and independent publishers, whose goals were 'fully identifie[d] with the interests of [their] authors... thereby contributing to the upsurge of a field of publishers homologous with that of writers' (61). For Bourdieu, this avant-garde 'pole' of literary production was directly opposed to the 'pole of large-scale production, subordinated to the expectations of a wide audience', which comprised the more commercial literature of nineteenth-century France (121). But the key trait of the avant-garde was that it was a 'pole of pure production' in which 'producers tend to have as clients only other producers (who are also rivals)' which is to say that the readers of avant-garde literature were other 'poets, novelists and theatrical people endowed with similar position characteristics' (121). In other words, avant-garde literary networks were presumptive, since the audiences for such works were composed either of creators or of those associated with culturally mediating institutions.

Contemporary Australian literary prosumption nonetheless differs from Bourdieu's account in an important respect, since what Bourdieu described constitutes the circulation of only one specific literary movement. Whereas the avant-garde was an explicit and self-conscious aesthetic movement that championed its own autonomy from more commercial production as a form of value, in the current moment it is *literature itself* that circulates among a field of producer-consumers. Contemporary literature, then, has taken on the cultural

form of avant-garde, but lacks the avant-garde's aesthetic program or its rhetorical energies. Indeed, if the avant-gardes *elected* to be 'underground' (albeit, as Bourdieu argues, in the pursuit of symbolic capital), contemporary networks of literature have been shaped, often passively, by large-scale changes in global economics, cultural policy, management paradigms, reading habits, and the dynamics of the publishing industry. The prosumption of the avant-gardes was the product of an ethos of aesthetic autonomy, but contemporary literary prosumption is, to a large degree, the result of literature's increasing marginalisation from economic and political institutions.

Arguing that these outside forces have transformed Australian literary culture into a network of producer-consumers may also appear to suggest that this literary culture is increasingly insular. But I want to suggest that another interpretation of these events is possible when one considers the unusual nature of authorship as an occupation. As Bernard Lahire argues, literature is neither a profession nor an occupation in any typical sense:

Unlike a whole range of other social universes, the literary game does not create clear boundaries between experts and laypersons [les profanes]: in the literary game there is no real equivalent of the hospital and the physician's white coat, or the courtroom and the judges' or jurists' robes. (455)

Lahire's surveys of writers in France support this claim, by demonstrating that the vast majority even of established writers are required to draw most or a substantial part of their income from professional fields that bear no relation to writing whatsoever (458). A similar survey undertaken in Australia suggested that the mean income for professional writers' creative income was only \$11,100 for the 2007/8 financial year, similarly indicating that even 'successful' Australian authors must similarly depend on outside sources of income or other employment (Throsby and Zednik 45).

Although Lahire acknowledges that some lucky few are able to make an income from their writing, he points out that the overwhelming majority of the literary field is, in fact, made up of amateur or part-time participants. Acknowledging the unusual nature of participation within the literary field further suggests a need to revise or reconsider whether or not it actually constitutes a field in the strict, Bordieusian sense of the term. Rather than being an entirely autonomous and self-contained *field*, literary culture comprises a network of actors for whom the literary is only one of many vocational affiliations (since those in the literary field may also be teachers, marketing copywriters, editors of educational texts, lawyers, doctors, primary carers for children, and so forth). One result of this is that literary culture actually draws together a series of individuals from discrete occupations who might otherwise never come into contact with one another.

While I am not so naïve as to argue that the literary scene is a paragon of cultural diversity, I am suggesting that the literary encourages new forms of social connection between otherwise disconnected agents rather than simply forming a hermetic or segregated subculture that is isolated from broader social participation. Here, as Keri Glastonbury has argued, contemporary Australian literary culture, in taking up ‘a more provincialised and provisional idea of the literary’, might also recall historical literary coteries (4). For Glastonbury, however, contemporary coteries are actually what Carson Bergstrom has termed a ‘coterie network’, which ‘both forms and links social groups at one and the same time’ (181). While coteries necessarily generate a notion of inside and outside, they can, as Lytle Shaw argues, introduce ‘a self-reflexive component’ that brings to the surface many assumptions about literary communities and thereby opens them up to critique from those who have been historically excluded. Regardless, the form of contemporary Australian literary culture, rather than representing the final gasp of a dying ‘old’ media, actually testifies to the way that individual agents from unrelated sectors of the community can come together in support of concepts and practices that have a value beyond the purely economic. Literary writing is not profitable, but that it continues to be practiced and consumed so widely testifies to the ongoing value attached to it.

If one accepts this account of the contemporary form of literary culture, however, another set of questions also arises, particularly about the various institutions that support and promote literature in Australia. Among most institutions related to literary culture, including universities, literary prizes, festivals, funding bodies and media outlets, there is very little acknowledgement or even awareness of the fact that most works of Australian literature are now produced by small publishers and often consumed by readers who have some stake in literary production. More attentive cultural policy is required to ensure that literary institutions reflect and support literary culture *as it currently exists*.

For example, national literary prizes for fiction are disproportionately awarded to titles produced by larger publishers. Between 2001 and 2014, only two small press books won the Miles Franklin Award (Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (Giramondo) in 2007 and Peter Temple’s *Truth* (Text Publishing) in 2010). Similarly, the now-defunct Age Book of the Year for Fiction (or Imaginative Writing) Award went to only two small press books between 2000 and 2012 (Steven Amsterdam’s *Things We Didn’t See Coming* (Sleepers Publishing) in 2009 and Fiona McGregor’s *Indelible Ink* (Scribe) in 2011). Ben Etherington, in ‘The Brain Feign’, argues that successful novels from larger publishers can engender self-reinforcing praise that often translates into such works being shortlisted for major literary prizes. While there may be some truth in this claim, there are other practical reasons why large publishers dominate such prizes; large publishers can

offer larger advances to established authors and have better marketing and PR to generate 'buzz' around titles. But the uneven distribution of prize-winning titles also suggests an unconscious bias perpetuated by those on judging panels, who may still hold on to assumptions derived from an outmoded literary paradigm—namely that only large publishers are capable of producing serious or culturally important Australian literary fiction. The bias of literary prizes towards large publishers can and should be criticised more stringently.

Similarly, the fact that small press titles have smaller print runs and are infrequently reprinted, means that they are far less likely to be set as texts for secondary and tertiary courses. The result is that many culturally important works of literature are not being adequately taught. Cultural policy's role is and should be to step in and address market failures such as these to ensure that culturally important Australian works are properly disseminated and recognised. The appearance of new book reviewing outlets, such as *The Sydney Review of Books*, also helps to ensure that small press titles will be adequately reviewed despite the decreasing space for book reviews available in traditional media outlets (Ricketts and Nolan 29). Finally, those engaged in the production of local literature need to advocate in a consistent and concerted way to ensure that cultural institutions reward and promote the contemporary mechanisms for the production of literature, rather than hanging onto old paradigms out of nostalgia.

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