

## BRANDL & SCHLESINGER



### Small Literary Publishing

Small independent publishers who are devoted to their authors and readers may soon become a thing of the past. I hope to be proven wrong in this gloomy prediction. The publishing world is currently dominated by five international media conglomerates with branches in Australia and whose budgets require the financial certainty of best sellers. They have created an explosion in the availability of books by competing for the same books and serving the same markets, yet their dynamics have nothing to do with literary or intellectual values. First time writers, poets and those whose books would not fit into mass market list find it is the small publisher who is more willing to consider their manuscript.

Yet, even small publishers such as Brandl & Schlesinger have an almost 99% rejection rate for manuscripts. It seems there are more writers in the world than readers! Never having worked in any other publishing company than Brandl & Schlesinger I can only describe the process we use to deal with manuscripts. We have no committees or marketing departments. My partner and I simply sit down and discuss the manuscript. Basically we accept what we like. Essentially we look for works that fit into our publishing list of literary fiction and non fiction, poetry and translations.

How do we decide what to publish? Every day we get numerous unsolicited manuscripts. I always have a sense of excitement as I open each envelope. My first impression is very important and can determine whether the manuscript will go into the slush pile or be kept for further consideration. Particularly important is the covering letter. Those with clip art floral borders go into rejection pile, as do those where the author has submitted a cover design for the book, often drawn by a family member. Covering letters that begin with "Hi there!" or have spelling and grammatical errors have a poor chance of success. Manuscripts that promise "to have every emotion and to appeal to everyone" are rapidly rejected as are those that do not fit into our list because we do not publish 'romances', adventure, crime, science fiction, 'self-help', the how-to manual or amateur poets who write verse. Submissions which fail to include a CV or a SSAE are not looked upon kindly.

Deciding what to accept for publication is more difficult than knowing what to reject. For fiction, the quality of writing and the content is of foremost importance for us. It is hard to define exactly what we are looking for, but what makes an impression is where the 'atmosphere' of the manuscript remains long after it is read or where the content has shifted my viewpoint.

Jason Epstein in *Book Business*, describes traditional publishing as "a cottage industry, decentralised, improvisational, personal". Small publishers usually have close contact with their authors. Many of our authors have become good friends, staying in our house if coming from interstate and reciprocally inviting us to stay with them. They can become involved in the book production process, suggesting cover images or even font preferences and are closely consulted in the editing. There is only two of us at Brandl & Schlesinger, with the occasional once a week assistant when the work load becomes overwhelming. My partner, Andras Berkes-Brandl designs the covers, does the layout for every one of our books and all the graphic work. I concentrate on editorial, publicity, overseas right sales and respond to the daily emails, phone calls and letters. Sometimes we outsource editing and always use freelance proof readers.

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Poetry is one of our publishing interests. We have a small but select list of award winning poets. Although publishing poetry, as every one knows, is not a profit making proposition, even with the kind support of the Australia Council, yet I believe it makes a cultural contribution to our society. The print runs are too small to cover costs, often rarely over 500 and booksellers, with few exceptions, do not like to stock contemporary Australian poetry. We are inundated with poetry manuscripts as we are amongst the few Australian publishers who publish poetry. Again it seems more people write poetry than buy other poets' books. Our criteria for considering the publication of a 'first' book of poetry, is that about 60% of the poems have been published previously in literary journals and the author has a reasonable high profile in the poetry world through poetry readings or other publications. This sometimes appears very difficult for new poets, but if no one has heard of them, their poems have never been previously published, then no one will buy their book, not matter how 'good' their poetry is. I am amazed at poets who inquire about submitting their manuscript yet never read works of contemporary poets. The main problem with poetry publishing is not the difficulty of finding poets, but finding readers who buy poetry books.

Despite the difficulty of getting published there were 9,750 books published in Australia last year and about 30,000 in UK and USA. Book shops in Australia have a choice of over 6,000 books a month for stock, creating high competition between titles, where each space for a book has to return so much in profit. Not only is the turnover rate in book shops very high but, if a book is not in high demand, its shelf life is almost that of a magazine. This puts much pressure on publishers, particularly small ones. If the book does not sell sufficient numbers it can be a financial disaster for a small publisher who does not have the back up of financial resources.

Small publishing has its rewards- over the past three years we have published twenty two books with our authors being nominated for eleven literary awards. Despite the problems and difficulties, to be a small, independent publisher with a focus on literary excellence is still a wonderful thing, for it is to play a role in the development of ideas and insights which make life more intelligible as well as more enjoyable.