

# Is Young Adult literature all grown up?

## **The Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship Report of Susannah Chambers, 2013-2014**

*Travel to New York for 10 weeks Feb – April 2014.*

The Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship is made possible by Australian Publishers Association and the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts, and by sponsorship from HarperCollins Publishers Australia, Allen & Unwin, Random House Australia, Penguin Group Australia, Hardie Grant Books, The Text Publishing Company, The Institute of Professional Editors (IPEd), Bryony Cosgrove (BDEF 1996), University of Queensland Press (UQP), NewSouth Publishing, Scribe Publications, Spinifex Press, Finch Publishing, Wild Dog Books and Richard Smart Publishing



Australian Government



## Contents

Thanks and acknowledgements / 3

About the Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship, and this report /7

**My aim** / 8

A quick word on methodology / 11

A note on the bookselling landscape /12

**What I learned and observed** /13

Has there been a change in the fortunes of YA? /14

How has that change manifested? /14

*Who is publishing YA? /14*

*Advances /15*

*Marketing /16*

Has the change affected the kinds of books that are published? /18

*Blockbusters versus award winners /18*

*Can you create a blockbuster? /20*

*The rise (and possible fall) of series publishing /21*

*The cross-over effect (and New Adult) /23*

*Licensed books and other non-traditional YA publishing /26*

The Globalisation of YA /28

*The movie effect /29*

*Social media /29*

*Feeding the beast /31*

Trends in YA /32

Being an editor in New York /34

A note on keeping a blog /38

**A few final thoughts** /39

## **Acknowledgements and thanks**

Profound thanks to the **Australian Publishers Association**, the **Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts**, and all the sponsors who make this fellowship possible: **HarperCollins Publishers Australia, Allen & Unwin, Random House Australia, Penguin Group Australia, Hardie Grant Books, The Text Publishing Company, The Institute of Professional Editors (IPed), Bryony Cosgrove (BDEF 1996), University of Queensland Press (UQP), NewSouth Publishing, Scribe Publications, Spinifex Press, Finch Publishing, Wild Dog Books and Richard Smart Publishing.**

Big thanks also to **Sue Hines** (BDEF 1994) and the selection committee of **Tracy O'Shaughnessy, Belinda Yuille, Lisa Reilly, Jane Morrow** (BDEF 2011-2012),, **Nicola Evans, Mandy Brett** and **Dee Reed**, for entrusting me with this amazing opportunity. Thank you for your encouragement and support throughout the process. I am very sensible of the honour and responsibility of being the Beatrice Davis fellow. Special thanks to **Dee Read**, formerly of the APA, who wrangled and supported me so well in the lead-up to my trip. And to **Jane Morrow** who gave me such good advice and encouragement.

### **In Australia**

All of my thanks to **Allen & Unwin**. To **Robert Gorman and Liz Bray** – for supporting my application and for being so accommodating with my leave. To the **children's publishing crew** – thanks to all of you for teaching me so much every day, for baking cakes and for general excellence. Special mention to **Eva Mills, Jodie Webster** and **Tracy O'Shaughnessy** (who sadly A&U can no longer claim). My time in New York affirmed for me how good we are at what we do.

Enormous thanks to **Angela Namoi** for being so generous with her time and support in helping me to get the Bologna Children's Book Fair and then showing me the ropes! And thank you, thank you to **Anna McFarlane**, for a lovely letter of support, and for being my Bologna guide, wing-lady and fellow Aperol Spritz enthusiast.

And unending thanks to **Erica Wagner** (BDEF 99), for being such an inspiration – in the way you edit, the way you publish, and the way you generally exist – and for helping me to have the courage and fire to apply for the Beatrice in the first place.

I am very grateful to the wonderful and talented **Kate Constable** and **Maureen McCarthy**, for their kind support of my application. Working with you both is an extreme privilege.

Thanks to everyone who spoke to me and gave me advice in the lead-up to going away, including **Anna Burkey** and **Adele Walsh** at the **Centre for Youth Literature**, and **Justine Larbalestier** and **Scott Westerfeld** – for excellent New York eating advice.

And to my **family and friends** – thanks so much for everything, you guys.

### **In New York**

This fellowship is so much about making connections and talking to people. So the biggest thanks of all goes to the amazing people in publishing in New York who took time out of their hugely busy lives to talk to me about what they do. As is the way in publishing, several of these people have moved to other jobs in the last few months, but this where they were when I talked to them.

To **Becca Worthington** and **Tina Jordan** at the **American Association of Publishers** – your enthusiasm, deep knowledge and amazing efficiency made my life one million times easier. I entered your office a few days after my arrival a bit at sea, and I left with my head spinning, an amazing list of contacts, and a plan of attack. Thank you so very much!

To everyone at **Little, Brown Books for Young Readers**. Especially **Tina McIntyre**, **Kate Sullivan**, **Elizabeth Bewley**, **Victoria Stapleton**, **Anne Dye**, **Krsiten Delaney**, **Amy Habayeb**, **Shawn Foster**, **Melanie Chang**, **Liza Baker**, **Dave Caplan** and **Andrew Smith**. Very special thanks to **Alvina Ling** and

**Connie Hsu** for saying yes in the first place, and for making me so welcome, for taking me to lunch and to karaoke! And to **Nikki Garcia**, for organizing my schedule so beautifully.

At **Knopf/Random House**: **Nancy Hinkel, Nancy Siscoe, Erin Clarke, Melanie Cecka, Allison Wortche, Michelle Frey, Katherine Harrison, Kelly Delaney, Karen Greenberg** and **Stephen Brown**. Huge thanks to **Erin Clarke** for organising everything and making me so welcome. Thanks to the whole team for your ideas, your time, your office and your lunch with me. Thank you also to **Wendy Lamb**, for a very interesting conversation – and for the postcard of the big New York blizzard of 1888, which I have on my office wall.

**Kathy Dawson** at **Penguin Books**. I enjoyed our conversation a lot, and I wish you great luck with your lovely list.

**Arthur Levine, Emily Clement** and **Nick Thomas** at **Arthur A Levine Books/Scholastic** not only for your time, your insight and wisdom, but also for a lovely lunch in the amazing Scholastic Glasshouse! I felt so spoiled.

**Kiera Parrot** and **Shelley Diaz** at **School Library Journal**. Thanks for taking the time to meet with me – your perspective from slightly outside the publishing industry was indispensable.

**Elise Howard** at **Algonquin Books for Younger Readers**. Your list is inspiring and your thoughts were relevant and helpful. Thanks so much!

**Angus Killick** at **Macmillan Children's**. Thank you so much for a frank and thoughtful discussion that I thoroughly enjoyed. Thanks to Holly West at **Feiwel and Friends**, mistress of all things **Swoon Reads**, for giving me such a fascinating insight into how the imprint came together and how it's progressing.

**Paul Crichton, Jon Anderson** and **Justin Chanda** at **Simon & Schuster**, for sharing your thoughts, and for letting me sit in on your acquisitions meeting.

**Meredith Barnes at Soho Teen.** For being generally lovely, interesting and knowledgeable, for taking me to the iconic Coffee Shop on Union Square, and letting me tag along to listen to Lauren Oliver.

**Elizabeth Mazer, Annie Stone** and to **TS Ferguson** from **Harlequin Teen** for your time and insights. TS – your karaoke rendition of *What Does the Fox Say* was one of the highlights of my trip!

**Erica Sussman at Harper Teen.** Thanks for your time and ideas. It was such a thrill to be in the room where Laura Ingalls Wilder publishing happens.

To literary scout **Jane Starr.** Thank you so much, Jane – for a very interesting discussion, for your time, for a lovely lunch, and for your kindness.

**Jill Grinberg, Cheryl Pientka** at **Katelyn Detweiler** at **Jill Grinberg Literary Management.** You guys were my first port of call in New York; it was snowing, and I was jetlagged, but you made it a soft landing and you gave me lots of food for thought!

Big loving thanks to **Libba Bray** and **Barry Goldblatt** – for talking to me about publishing, then taking me down the road to eat the food and drink the wine. You must come back to Melbourne very soon so I can return the favour.

I would have crumpled into a sad, small heap without **Virginia Murdoch**, who housed me, fed me, showed me the NYC ropes, and kept me sane in any number of big and small ways. Thank you, Ginny – a million times over.

Thank you also to **Sophie Cunningham**, for being a big part of the reason I am an editor at all, for being so supportive and wise about publishing, and also for lending me Virginia.

And lastly to my partner, **Tom Stringer.** For all the things, always.

## About the fellowship and this report

The Beatrice Davis Editorial fellowship is a unique and important part of the Australian publishing landscape. Named for one of our great literary editors, the fellowship is one of the only public platforms that recognises and celebrates the art of editing. The fellowship sends a mid-career editor to New York for 8-10 weeks to research their chosen field in that great literary and cultural hub. It is an opportunity for professional and personal development that also enriches Australian publishing as a whole. The alumni of the Beatrice Davis are all women I admire – women who have helped shaped Australian editing and publishing in varied ways.

Through the Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship I have grown in confidence, learned a vast amount, have a deeper knowledge of editing and publishing, and a clearer view of the Australian publishing industry, for being able to see it in comparison to the largest English-speaking book market in the world.

This report is not a detailed description of my day-to-day activities in New York. It is my impressions of the industry as it existed between Feb and April 2014. It's a rumination on the things that stood out to me, an Australian editor far from home, and the things I found interesting and challenging.

I have tried to keep the tone informal and as widely relevant as possible. My general observations grew out of many specific conversations I had. But, in respect for the people who were so generous with their time and thoughts and company secrets, I have not, for the most part, directly quoted individuals, nor discussed confidential specifics from any of the meetings I sat in on. If anyone would like more detailed thoughts about some of my specific placements and appointments (or photos of the amazing New York snow), you can read the blog I kept at [www.susannahandbeatrice.com](http://www.susannahandbeatrice.com), or feel free to email me directly.

For me, the Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship was a fantastic experience, of huge professional and personal benefit. I hope I have translated at least a bit of

that here for wider consumption. And I strongly urge any mid-career editors to apply for the fellowship – it is an amazing opportunity, which our industry should be very proud to foster and support.

## **My aim**

In my professional and personal life I am very interested in Young Adult (YA) literature. I won't go into a detailed description of what 'Young Adult' means here, but a little bit of background is useful for explaining my thoughts leading up to going to New York. There are many, varied and vexed definitions, and you can read some discussion on that here:

<http://alienonion.blogspot.com.au/2009/02/what-is-ya.html> and here:

<http://terribleminds.com/ramble/2013/06/04/25-things-you-should-know-about-young-adult-fiction/>

Suffice it to say that 'Young Adult' is not a genre, it is a sales category, a description of intended audience, and to some degree a content advisory. You will not find forty-somethings discussing failed marriages centre stage in YA literature. You will usually not find explicit sexual content. You might find fantasy, or romance, or science fiction, or dystopia, or contemporary realism, or any other genre you look for. And you almost certainly *will* find a teenage protagonist, struggling with who they are and who they want to be, in whatever world they inhabit.

Even if you aren't familiar with YA literature as a whole, you will be sure to know individual titles. You may have read the Australian classics *Looking for Alibrandi* by Melina Marchetta, or Isobelle Carmody's *Obernewtyn* series, or John Marsden's *Tomorrow When the War Began* series. And working in publishing, you will not have been able to escape John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, which has sat at the top of our Nielsen BookScan charts for many months and has sold more than 300,000 copies across two editions. You will also probably know *The Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins, the *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth, books by Gayle Forman and Cassandra Clare, and of course, Stephanie Myer's



*Twilight*. These, and other American YA books, have been HUGE bestsellers in Australia and around the world.

The fact that I am so confident that anyone reading this report will have heard of most, if not all, of these American YA titles is one of the main reasons I thought that *now* was an excellent time to study Young Adult literature in New York. It seemed to me that the fortunes of YA have undergone a radical shift in the last ten years. Young Adult books are now routinely among the bestsellers across the whole market. And people outside publishing have now actually *heard* of the term 'YA' – and having heard of it, have occasionally written irritating opinion pieces on it in the *New York Times* and elsewhere – about what it is, what it should and shouldn't encompass, and who should and shouldn't be reading it,

So what has changed over the last ten years? Well... 2015 will mark the tenth anniversary of the publication of *Twilight* by Stephanie Myer – the book and series that, in hindsight, marked the dawn of the age of the blockbuster Young Adult books coming out of the USA. (*Harry Potter* was probably the first global children's blockbuster, but although Harry grows into a teenager through the series, I classify those books as children's literature, not Young Adult.)

We credit the USA with inventing, or at least with naming, the teenager. And with inventing, or at least with naming, 'Young Adult' fiction in the 1960s. Most people will list SE Hinton, Robert Cormier, Cynthia Voigt and a host of other American authors as the earliest writers of *acknowledged* Young Adult fiction.

Judy Blume's *Forever* was published in 1975. Twenty years later, when I was in high school, copies were still being passed avidly around, with Certain Scenes carefully dog eared so you'd know just where to turn first. But the real superstars of YA literature during my high-school years were Australian writers. Writers like Robin Klein, Gillian Rubenstein, Victor Kelleher, Isobelle Carmody and John Marsden.

We have absolutely brilliant Young Adult authors writing today in Australia – we have diverse authors, writing interesting stories in all kinds of genres, but if you looked at the Nielsen BookScan sales figures the week I left for New York, you would have had to scroll down through about fifty YA titles before you found one by an Australian author. This is still the case today, and was the case for a long while before I left. Young Adult fiction is selling in mind-blowingly huge quantities, but it is YA out of the USA, not home-grown. The top selling US titles sell in the hundreds of thousands in our market. Australian YA is lucky to sell ten thousand.

Interestingly, this is not the case in Adult fiction – either literary or commercial – where, although there are always international titles high on the bestseller lists, we usually find several Australian authors in the top ten or twenty. And it's also not the case in younger fiction, where we also see Australian writers at the top of the charts.

From my perspective as an editor in Australia, it seemed to me as if something was happening to Young Adult literature, it was happening in the USA, and it was spreading around the globe.

So in February 2014, I flew off to New York in February with some questions about this phenomenon.

Questions including:

- **Have the fortunes of YA literature truly changed, or does it just seem that way from the outside?**
- **Have blockbuster YA books changed the way YA is edited, published and sold? And has it changed who is buying it?**
- **How do you create a blockbuster?**
- **Can we push our own home-grown YA down the same path to huge sales?**
- **And if we can, do we really want to?**

## **A quick word on methodology**

Several previous Beatrice fellows have used the opportunity to embed themselves in one or two houses for many weeks – shadowing editors, working on manuscripts and immersing themselves in the culture and practice of editing in a particular publishing house.

I can see how this approach can be very valuable, but rather than make an in-depth study of the editorial process, I wanted to take a broader survey of attitudes to the editing and publishing of Young Adult literature across the industry. So, apart from an excellent week at Knopf and a few wonderful days at Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, I spread myself around town as much as possible – interviewing editors, agents, publicity, marketing and rights people across the publishing industry, sitting in on editorial and acquisitions meetings, attending meetings of the American Association of Publishers and Children’s Book Council seminars, and visiting as many bookshops as possible (much to the detriment of my luggage quota).

The main benefit of this approach was that I could speak to a broad range of people to get a good idea of how Young Adult literature was being acquired, edited, designed, marketed and talked about across big and small houses, independent and multinational, emerging and established. I quickly learned that I could happily spend a year interviewing people and still not talk to everyone worth talking to – but nonetheless I got a good cross-section of the industry in a busy ten weeks.

This approach also helped me avoid the problem some of the previous fellows I’d spoken to described as sometimes feeling a bit underutilised after a few weeks in one place.

The drawback to my approach was that I perhaps missed out on some of the insight you get from being on the spot, and a trusted part of the furniture, when

embedded for more lengthy periods in one or two houses. There is only so much that people are willing to tell you on short acquaintance.

I also found that while rewarding and interesting, talking to new people in new situations every day, and the hustle of setting up so many meetings, was quite tiring and challenging.

During my fellowship, I also darted across to Bologna for the Children's Book Fair. This was really useful, as it allowed me to fit the conclusions I was drawing about Young Adult literature in the US into the context of the global market for YA. I also saw some of the people I had met spruiking their books in a different setting, which was enlightening.

### **A note on the bookselling landscape.**

For a huge market, the US bookselling landscape is now frighteningly limited. In several of my interviews, people attempting to maintain a level of discretion talked about their relationship with 'a certain chain bookstore', only to laugh ruefully a minute later, 'Oops, that's not going to work is it? There's only one of those.' The close of Borders has left Barnes & Noble as the sole national chain bookstore. As such, B&N is vastly important, and has quite a lot of influence over publishers – over cover design and even sometimes over content – understandably, when they account for somewhere around 30-40% of sales. Strong support from Barnes & Noble can ensure a book's success.

Barnes & Noble has a big Young Adult section. It is split into three categories: Teen Fiction, Teen Fantasy and Adventure and something that used to be called Paranormal Romance. It's now just called Romance, but the shelves are still filled with covers that are black and red and purple and rather soulful looking. (I do wonder if the death of paranormal romance has been rather exaggerated. There's no doubt that editors are suffering the fatigue and looking elsewhere, but are readers?)

Amazon is the other huge player in the market. But, in keeping with Amazon's shadowy presence in the wider world, I found people less forthcoming about their dealings with them. Sometimes people genuinely seemed to forget their existence, even though they make up such a large percentage of sales. 'B&N, indies... Oh and Amazon.' One person speculated with horror about what would happen to publishing if Amazon bought Barnes & Noble to turn their bricks-and-mortar stores into local, urban Amazon warehouses.

The stores that in Australia we would call discount department stores (DDS), stores like Walmart and Target, are also increasingly important. But, as in Australia they will often jump on-board a book or series after it is already a success, sometimes years after initial publication. So it's hard to count on sales through those channels.

Independent bookstores are important and much-loved, but account for a tiny proportion of sales – especially in teen fiction. The fact that indies are finding it hard to maintain a presence in America's biggest cities has been well documented. (If you're interested, Google: 'Literary City, Bookstore Desert' for a *New York Times* article that sums up the situation in Manhattan.) But they are still an important part of the bookselling landscape, and publishers do what they can to support them.

Young Adult and children's books also find a large part of their market through schools and libraries. Of which more later.

## **What I learned and observed**

The publishing scene is so large and diverse in New York that trying to draw a solid conclusion about anything is hard. As soon as you grasp something as an incontrovertible fact, someone says something to contradict it. But apart from

the eternal truth that things are always changing, and everyone is mostly guessing at why or how books work or don't work, I did start to find common themes and resonances, and reoccurring ideas.

**Has there actually *been* a change in the fortunes of YA literature? Or did it just look like that from the outside, from a market flooded with huge-selling US imports?**

This one was easy to answer, because I heard the same thing over and over again, across the board: an unequivocal *yes*. Yes, there has been a change. Yes, the huge success of *Twilight* changed Young Adult editing and publishing. And yes, the subsequent blockbuster Young Adult titles have cemented that change. I met many editors who had worked for a long time in children's literature in New York, and all of them felt that things were different than when they had begun their careers, even if it was sometimes just *the flavour* of the thing that had changed.

**So apart from an ineffable flavour, in what concrete ways have the changes manifested?** As with all change it has come with both opportunity and cost.

**1) There are more people publishing Young Adult literature.**

In the last five to ten years, through a time when publishing as a whole was facing a Global Financial Crisis, adjusting to new formats and new ways of doing business, and suffering downturns, downsizing, layoffs, uncertainty and take-overs, there has actually been an *increase* in the number of imprints specialising in Young Adult and junior fiction, and big publishing houses who have no previous record of publishing Young Adult literature have established YA imprints.

For example, Harlequin Teen, which was established in 2009, was set up with the express aim of winning *Twilight* fans to Harlequin. As the appetite for paranormal romance has waned, but the YA market has remained strong, Harlequin Teen have shifted their list significantly. Now their brief is just to

publish quality teen fiction, not even specifically romance – although many of their books have a romantic element.

Other big publishers have strengthened their YA lists and created new imprints. And smaller publishers are doing it too. In the last five years, SoHo created SoHo Teen, Algonquin created Algonquin Young Readers, Sourcebooks now have their teen imprint Sourcebooks Fire. And Quirk Books – the adult-focussed, although somewhat uncharacterisable publisher of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* – have done very well publishing the YA title *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*.

I think this reflects that the US publishing industry, at a time of mass uncertainty, of failing retail outlets, and the rise in self-publishing, thinks there is money to be made in Young Adult literature. YA has gone from being a quiet achiever to a large and relied-upon revenue source. In an uncertain market, diversification is smart and the huge success of a handful of Young Adult titles have brought YA literature centre stage in the publishing world.

## **2) Advances have risen.**

One of the most concrete changes, and one of the biggest differences between YA here and in the US, is the level of advances paid to authors. Advances are obviously higher in general in the bigger American market, but advances for Young Adult fiction have risen to extreme heights. They have backed off a bit in the last year or so, but *seven-figure advances* are by no means unheard of, especially across a series.

Acquisitions processes differ from house to house, as they do in Australia, but at several houses, the editors I spoke with don't even have to seek approval from the publishing chain if the advance they're paying is less than \$100,000.

\$100,000 seems to be something of a magic number. One agent told me that in their experience, many publishing houses won't bother to even consider a

Young Adult book if it's going to cost them *less* than \$100,000. If you don't have to pay much, the book clearly doesn't even have *the potential* to be a blockbuster, so why would you take it on? From this agent's perspective, the advent of blockbuster YA books, rather than opening a wider door to all YA, has made it harder for him to sell quality, mid-list fiction, or anything that falls outside the scope of the current hot property.

Having said that, several editors reported that they still consider an entry level advance to be around the \$10-15,000 mark. And that was reflected in the acquisitions meetings I sat in on. So obviously no answer holds 100% true – after all, this is publishing.

But whatever the case, it is true that the upper end of advances is now vastly higher than it was ten years ago. And with big payments come big expectations.

### **3) The amount of money and time spent on marketing Young Adult literature has radically increased.**

As far as I can judge, the correlation between the amount of advance paid and the amount spent on marketing is absolute: the more money you spend to acquire a book, the more you spend to ensure the book is a success.

The more money you spend on a book at all stages of its life, the more the publishing company as a whole will be throwing its weight behind the book, will be tracking the book's progress, and will be involving its most senior people in decisions about that book.

To put it another way, the more you expect from a book, the more you work to make it meet your expectations. When expectations are through the roof, everybody works really hard to meet them. The marketing plans for YA books earmarked as potential blockbusters can be phenomenal. Year-long (at least) marketing campaigns are now the norm for some of the bigger houses,



combined with huge advertising outlay, big social media pushes and a lot of time and effort spent on reaching the teens themselves, and on reaching adult decision-makers at the big fairs and through educational and library channels. In fact, it's obvious that marketing for 'big properties' actually never stops. There is always something new to be talking about, and if there isn't, you manufacture it.

Traditionally, children's and Young Adult literature have been quiet achievers. Much like certain kinds of genre fiction, YA has quietly done its own thing. It has been liked and respected in its own circles and largely ignored outside them. Some editors have thought of this as the 'ghetto' to be escaped from, and some as a haven.

I definitely got a sense that teen and children's departments in the US had been used to 'flying under the radar' within their huge multinational companies. And that to some extent, those days are over. Now that we know that it's *possible* for YA fiction to be the biggest seller in the market, editors acquiring Young Adult fiction are no longer niche publishers; they are potential sources of the Next Big Thing.

Lack of expectations can be frustrating. It's awful when no one takes your books seriously, when marketing dollars *aren't* spent, and people are taken by surprise when a book does well. But when expectations and outlay are sky high, so is scrutiny. Some editors felt bathed in the warmth of this new love and attention, and revelled in the sense that finally books for teens were being taken seriously, and their potential was being recognised. Others seemed to feel the attention more as the sweeping eye of Sauron, suddenly focused on their Shire. Scrutiny from above and increased expectations can make it harder to justify the small yet much-loved projects, the beloved author's underperforming series, or the challenging, rule-breaking stand-alone novel.

## **So, has the boom in YA affected the *kinds* of books that are published?**

Obviously the answer to that question is different from house to house. Editors at literary imprints – like Knopf, like Algonquin Young Readers etc – are still searching for the same elusive things they always have been: compelling voice, original premise, delicious writing, and hoping they can help these books find their place in the world, even if that place is not the top of the *New York Times* bestseller lists.

### **1) Blockbusters versus award winners**

Sometimes, to get a better picture of something, you need to examine what it's not. The 'catch-up, follow-on' nature of publishing in general means that we know publishing houses are desperately keen to find the next blockbuster YA title – the one that will break all boundaries, sell to adults as well, be made into a movie, set social media on fire and inspire a glut of fan-art and fan-fiction.

But what *else* are they publishing for teenagers and how are they talking about it?

In my travels around town, I kept hearing the term 'award winner' used to describe a certain kind of Young Adult book. It took me a while to work out exactly what that term meant. On one level, it's obvious. An 'award winner' is a literary book that wins or is shortlisted for prizes and awards.

But I was hearing the term used more like a category, and I came to realise that it doesn't necessarily mean a book is a hyper-literary contender for the big national literary awards, like the Printz or the Newbery. Whether an 'award winner' goes on to actually *win* awards is irrelevant, 'award winner' is a statement of intention. 'Award winner' is a shortcut for saying 'not a blockbuster'.

I felt that, in its way, the term is a little bit defiant. It's a way to define the success of a Young Adult title by measuring it against something other than the bestsellers. 'We didn't spend a million dollars; we don't think it will sell a million copies; but we can still call this book a success because there are other ways to define success than by becoming a multi-national bestseller.' And those ways include literary merit, and strong sales through schools and libraries.

In a restricted retail landscape, Young Adult and children's literature in the US has the good fortune to still have a vibrant and healthy school and libraries market. Learning to consider this area of sales, and market directly to it, is a skill that houses new to publishing junior fiction and YA have had to learn quickly.

There are a number of library and readers' choice awards that are given annually that can make a huge difference to sales. Texas alone has several, and getting a book on the list for the biggest, the Texas Bluebonnet Awards, can instantly add 5000 to hardback and 10 000 to paperback sales. A book listed for one state award often comes to the attention of other lists – having a snowballing effect. (In some ways, we can think of this as the rough equivalent of the effect of the Children's Book Council Awards in Australia. Except with a much bigger sales impact, and with many more opportunities for shortlisting.)

Obviously, publishers in Australia and all over the world have long classified books as commercial versus literary. But to me, the streaming of 'blockbusters' versus 'award winners' in Young Adult fiction in New York felt much more extreme, the categories less fluid, the boundaries deeper. Not just a plan of how to approach the selling and marketing of a book, but a definition of everything about that book from the moment the editor first reads the manuscript.

I got a real sense that people do not expect the next blockbuster to emerge from the award winners, and vice versa.

In some ways, 'award winners' (and I think we should resist reading that as meaning 'overly literary' or 'difficult') are closer to the kind of books that occupied Young Adult lists before the rise and rise of the category commercially. They are also more like the kinds of books that we publish at home. There is obviously still room for these sorts of book from the standpoint of the editorial heart. But it became clear that there is also room for them from the commercial stand point – they sell solidly through schools and library channels (very important in an age of diminishing bookshops), they backlist well, and they are good for the reputation of the publisher.

In fact, several editors told me that they are *actively not interested* in publishing blockbuster YA books, for instance at Algonquin Young Readers. Elise Howard's list is brand new and very small, so for her there is no such thing as a 'lead title'. Each one of her books gets the same amount of love, attention and money. And she is actively seeking quality, stand-alone fiction. She, and many other editors, like Arthur Levine and Kathy Dawson, talked about wanting to publish terrific books they can champion, above all other considerations.

Several editors at smaller houses told me that they won't even consider books with big potential, and big price tags. That they are not actually equipped to put the money and time into a book needed to *make it a blockbuster*, even if they wanted to.

Which leads me inexorably to the question...

## **2) Can you really create a blockbuster?**

Well, some signs point to yes...

As I've said, the more you pay to acquire a book, the more you put into marketing to ensure you recoup the amount you spent. The more you put

into marketing, the more you spend on making the book itself look pretty and pick-up-able. No scrimping on fancy finishes for a potential blockbuster.

Angus Killick the VP of marketing at McMillan Children's was one of many people who stressed to me the importance of having the *whole* company singing with one voice on a potential blockbuster from the *very* beginning. Not just editorial. Not just marketing. But literally everyone in the company from the mail room kids to the CEO must know the book, believe in it and use every opportunity to talk about it *in the same kind of way*.

This is not a great new secret of publishing – but it was striking that many people I spoke to thought that mega success could not happen *without* this kind of commitment, and that multi-national publishers are now putting this kind of effort into Young Adult titles in a way they wouldn't have only a few years ago.

Except this is publishing, so the formula doesn't always work. Big books flop. Small books, with no marketing spend, sometimes are sprinkled with the magic dust and become big books. But even so, many editors I spoke to saw a genuine divide between 'award-winners' and 'potential blockbusters'. There is definitely a sense in US publishing houses that the way to make a blockbuster is to identify it from the very start and work, and pay, to make it happen.

### **3) The rise (and possible fall?) of the series**

You don't have to go to all the way to New York to know that series publishing is very popular, and has been very successful in YA. So successful that the *New York Times* splits its bestseller lists into 'Young Adult' and 'Series'. The *New York Times* doesn't disclose the numbers behind its lists, so it's impossible to gauge how the lists would look if recombined, but most weeks it's a safe bet that the top spots of the combined list would be occupied by series titles, as they are on the Australian charts. Except, of course, for

John Green. (If I turned my trip to New York into a Broadway musical there would definitely be a number called 'Except for John Green'. In fact, it would probably be the opening number, reprised numerous times throughout, in different moods. 'Except for John Green – *allegro*' all the way through to 'Except for John Green – *lacrimoso*'.)

The *New York Times* bestseller lists themselves provide a neat illustration of the changing fortunes of children's and Young Adult literature. The bestseller lists have been running in the paper since the 1930s. But it wasn't until 2000 that a separate Children's list was created – and that was in response to the fact that the *Harry Potter* books had been occupying the top spots of the general fiction list for so long. Fourteen years later, the broad Children's category has now been split into Children's Picture Books, Children's Middle Grade, Young Adult and Series. To get an idea of how those children's categories are selling in comparison to the adult categories, you can cross-reference with the combined USA Today bestseller lists – where you very often see YA titles occupying top spots. ('Except For John Green – *fortissimo*.) The USA Today lists are, in fact, a much easier and more transparent way to get a handle on what's actually selling, rather than what the *New York Times* feels good about showcasing.

Series publishing in YA works for several reasons. If you're going to spend a huge amount of money in marketing a book, it's harder to justify doing it on a single stand-alone. There's so much more ongoing bang for your buck if you are establishing a series.

If you're onto a good thing, stick to it. This is especially true in publishing for young people, where the accepted wisdom is that kids and teens will dwell in a familiar world with beloved characters for as long as humanly possible. And in a market where recommendations by friends, family, librarians and teachers play such an important part, 'Have you read the next Percy Jackson' is an easy sell.

The flip side of series publishing, though, is that your risk is higher. Your outlay is so much greater than for a stand-alone. And the very high prices paid for potential blockbuster series has definitely wearied some editors. Many editors I spoke to reported being wary of taking on new series, and were increasingly searching for strong stand-alone titles. The successes of John Green, Rainbow Rowell and Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* have made this an easier proposition to get through acquisitions meetings.

I asked several editors if they thought you could brand an author like you would a series. Can you reap the rewards of publishing a series without so much of the risk? The answer almost across the board was 'We try, but it's very difficult.' ('Except for John Green – *sforzando*') The jury is still out as to whether stand-alone contemporary realist fiction can sell strongly as a whole.

#### **4) The cross-over effect**

One of the biggest changes to come out of the YA boom is who the books are selling to. It's no secret that adults are reading YA. They are reading it in on their devices. They are seeking it out in bookshops. And there is a large and vibrant blogging community of adults devouring and discussing YA.

In fact, most of the blockbuster bestsellers have been successes *because* they crossed markets. The first US edition of *The Fault in Our Stars* had a quote on the front cover from Jodi Picoult – bestselling author of commercial women's fiction. And the now-iconic blue Rodrigo Corral-designed jacket is striking, but completely without any typical cue that it's a young adult novel. No photo, no partial girl's face, no legs dangling from a pier. ('Except for John Green – *misterioso*.)

So how do you target two readerships at once? When do you identify a book as cross-over? And what do you do about it? Are there editorial decisions made that help something to cross to an adult readership? Do you risk

alienating your core teen readers? How much does the potential for something to cross-over smooth the path to acquisition?

From experience in my own editorial life, and from talking to other editors at home from other houses, I know that these are questions that many people working in Young Adult fiction in Australia are grappling with.

And sadly for us I'm not sure I dug up satisfactory concrete answers to these questions in New York. Even with demonstrable success in tapping into cross-over markets, these questions are still being asked.

Writers often say that they write with no audience in mind, that they write for themselves and for the story, and that they often don't know the market they have written for until their publisher tells them. Editors have to be rather more commercially minded, but I do think that something of the same feeling is in play when an editor first reads a manuscript. 'I adore this; we must publish it; now who are we going to sell it to?'

Identifying which books will cross to an adult market sometimes seemed to be mostly about the vibe of the thing. 'You read a manuscript and you just know: this one will cross over.' Sometimes people cite the quality and sophistication of the writing, sometimes the themes and subject matter, sometimes the romantic element, sometimes just 'Read it; you'll understand.'

As to what to do about it once you'd identified something as cross-over? That's also up for debate.

Some take the *Field of Dreams* approach – if you build it, they will come. There is a sense that adults reading YA are active searchers, they know what they want and where to go for it, and they will find your titles even though you actively and primarily market them to a teen audience.



Others very strategically, very actively pursue adult readers. Any book that has been sold in a huge auction as a massive blockbuster-in-the-making will almost certainly have been bought with a cross-over audience in mind. And the size and sophistication of the marketing machines behind such books is more than up to the task of targeting different demographics simultaneously.

I found it very interesting that Barnes & Noble categorically will not shelve books in both the Young Adult and Adult sections of their stores. So, to take John Green as an example again, you can find *The Fault in Our Stars* in several places inside a Barnes & Noble store: Young Adult, Best Sellers, Staff Picks etc. (I counted it in six separate locations in one B&N in Park Slope.) But *never* in the adult fiction section. And independent bookstores don't tend to have room to shelve a book in more than one place. So cross-over placement and marketing has to be done outside of, and almost in spite of, bookstores.

A good example of the fluidity of the market for, and definition of, 'Young Adult' is the fact that books are so readily re-classified from market to market. Books are often published as adult in Australia that go on to be published as Young Adult in the USA. There may be examples of the reverse happening, but I don't know of them. The most well-known example is probably Markus Zusak's huge bestseller *The Book Thief*. It was originally published in Australia as an adult title, but was classified as YA in the US market. The same is true for Craig Silvey's *Jasper Jones*, and Margo Lanagan's *Tender Morsels*.

Is this just the coincidence of which American editors were offered these books? Or is it an indication of the relative position of Young Adult fiction in our respective markets? Is it perhaps that our inclination is to publish 'good' books as adult, so they are taken seriously and given real support, and let them cross down to teens, whereas the American market for YA is strong enough that you can publish a lead title as YA and expect it to cross up? Would *The Book Thief* and *Jasper Jones* have been as big as they have been in the Australian market if they had been published as YA?

### **I feel I need to make a quick mention of New Adult.**

The category began life at St Martin's Press – an attempt to describe and market books that were about and for young people who had moved beyond their teen years, but were still grappling with some of the same emotional experiences – people at uni, or in first jobs, and maybe with more sex and drugs and what a TV classification board might call Adult Themes. New Adult, by this definition could include Jay McInerney's classic *Bright Lights, Big City*, or, closer to home, Laura Buzo's *Holier Than Thou*. But largely whenever I mentioned 'New Adult' to editors in New York, I was met with an eye roll. The category has slipped its moorings and has now come to mean not much more than 'older YA with sex' bordering on 'erotica with 20 year-olds.' It's not a particularly helpful term, and book stores have certainly not embraced it. 'If I were to tell Barnes & Noble that this title was New Adult they just stare at us blankly. Like, okay, but where do you want it? Adult is here; teen is here.'

### **5) Licensed books and other non-traditional publishing**

The changing and uncertain world of publishing, the shrinking book retail landscape, and the recent success of commercial YA, has lead publishers to diversify their YA lists in lots of ways. One of those ways is licensed publishing.

The aim of licensed publishing is to find new reading audiences by partnering with people who make things other than books, and sell those things in places other than bookstores. This has long been a staple of publishing for the younger end of the market – think *Thomas the Tank Engine*. But now publishers are aging up this type of publishing. For instance, Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, who have always been known as quite a literary publisher, have recently and successfully partnered with the toy company Mattel to produce *Ever After High*, a series of books and a toyline.

Publishing houses in the US are further down the track of pairing with non-traditional partners and platforms to stay relevant to young people and to expand their market reach. Scholastic's *Spirit Animals* series, which is a rich world of gaming, books and an online community, MacMillan's Swoon Reads a YA romance imprint, which uses an internet-based crowd-sourcing platform to find and publish manuscripts, and the huge success of the Minecraft books are a few examples (as far as I know, the Minecraft books originated in the UK).

I encountered varying views on whether this intersection of books and other media is a cynical dilution of the "pure" reading experience, exploiting young people for profit – or an important part of ensuring that books and stories have a place in a rapidly changing media landscape. I came away thinking that the truth was somewhere in between. If the publishing industry is to stay viable and relevant, we need to support creators who are experimenting with telling stories in new ways. As well as staying committed to our heartland of straight-up great stories by wonderful writers.

For me, it also became clear that not everybody has to be doing *every* kind of publishing. The people I encountered who were the unhappiest with this shift, were people who seemed to be forced into areas of publishing they didn't love or fully understand.

Swoon Reads is a great example of what could come across as a way to cash in on the growing trend for self-publishing, but instead feels like an exciting experiment in publishing romance for teens, because it is loved and understood so deeply by its publishers and its community participants.

I'm not going to dwell on other kinds of publishing, but I couldn't resist just mentioning a branch of publishing that seems peculiar to New York: the Celebrity Editor. We are familiar with sportspeople, reality stars, and politicians having a stab at being an author, but I don't think we're quite as familiar with them turning their hand to editing and publishing. Johnny Depp

has his own imprint, Infinitum Nihil, at Harper Collins, celebrity chefs and politicians have their own lists. And this is now happening in the teen and children's area too. My favourite is baseball star Derek Jeter with Derek Jeter Publishing at Simon & Schuster. People I talked with at S&S swore black and blue that the retiring Yankees' shortstop is passionately interested in books, and plans to be quite hands-on with his list. It's true that Faber and Faber in the UK employ Jarvis Cocker as Editor-at-Large – but for the most part, this seems an American phenomenon.

I don't know that there is anything significant for the Australian industry to learn from this – Does anyone want to hire Warney as an editor? – but it does illustrate something about the breadth of the US market (a celebrity connection can sustain not just one title but an ongoing publishing list) and their lateral thinking when it comes to expanding market reach.

## **The Globalisation of American YA**

The most ubiquitous view during my time in New York was not of the Statue of Liberty or the Empire State Building. It was the rear view of Shailene Woodley in the poster for the *Divergent* film. The marketing for that film was visible literally everywhere – on huge billboards, in taxis, in collaborations with make-up brands and upscale department stores, on subway platforms and, of course, in bookstores. I saw the same thing in London and Italy when I nipped across the pond to the Bologna Book Fair, and I saw it back home in Australia. US YA fiction is now a truly global phenomenon.

In some ways, it has made rights sales easier. Bestsellers open the door to new markets and help to build relationships where previously it was hard to get a foot in the door. But bestsellers can be limiting. If everyone, in every market, is buying the rights to the same book then other books suffer. One rights person told me that 'because it's so competitive, you have to have *something* that's a

bestseller on your list somewhere, or you almost can't survive.' But I also encountered the sanguine view that eventually enough of the big books will be sold internationally and \*not\* make money that things will swing back to a more diverse playing field.

Adult literature published out of the big English-speaking markets of London and New York also crosses around the world. Literary fiction like Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Donna Tart's *The Goldfinch*, and commercial or genre fiction writers like JRR Martin, do very well in our market. But our home-grown authors are still managing to penetrate the top ranks. Why is US Young Adult literature that much stickier in our market?

### **1) The movie effect**

It's hard to know how to talk about movies and TV in relation to the fortunes of YA books. It is certainly true that all the blockbuster titles in the charts have movies attached. But you get stuck in a bit of a recursive loop. Did Hollywood make YA popular? Or did Hollywood discover YA after it had already become popular, thereby making it *more* popular?

I encountered general agreement that there is no such thing as a bad movie in book land. Many of the films made from YA properties have flopped: *Beautiful Creatures*, *Vampire Academy*, *Percy Jackson*, and *The Mortal Instruments* films all under-performed – but everyone reported that sales of the books were significantly boosted off the back of the film marketing campaign.

Anecdotally, this is not true in Australia, where the marketing push is somewhat muted. But surely Hollywood has at least contributed to the fact that American YA has taken such a firm hold in our market?

### **2) What about social media?**

I think it's probably true that teenagers are more globally engaged than any other age group. Twitter and Tumblr know no geographic boundaries. And teenagers are often very vocal and active in online fandoms. Rather than being restricted to passing books you love among your friends, you can now

perform your deep and abiding love for a book or an author for the whole world to see.

Fandom can be a badge of pride, a welcoming community, an identity. And just as with so many other things, the sheer weight of numbers of fans in the US is overwhelming. It can't help but saturate anyone using social media to engage with the world of books. If you are on Tumblr, your dash is filled with the thoughts and feels of Americans. So it's no wonder that the teen space is obsessed with US content.

Publishing houses in New York are very aware of social media as a powerful platform and marketing tool. But they are also aware that it's a difficult space to negotiate, and you have to do it well, or you risk doing it very badly.

Teenagers in the social media sphere are hypersensitive to the stench of marketing. They are there to interact with each other, to squee over things they love, and sometimes to rub up against the people who *make* the things they love. But 'the people who make the things they love' are the writers, the actors, the famous and creative individuals with cred and cachet. They are not the corporations – the publishers – behind them.

It became clear to me that publishers who use social media well have realised that to participate successfully in the fan space, you have to act as a fan yourself. It's not enough to be the creators of content, you have to be consumers of content. More and more, publishers are setting up Tumblr pages and Twitter feeds and blogs to talk about things other than just their own books. They talk about other types of media that they know the fans they are engaging with are interested in (*Dr Who*, anyone?). They talk about how excited individuals within the company are about the book at hand. They share funny or awkward moments from the publicity trail. They talk about cake. And craft. And cats. And fingernails painted to look like book covers. In other words, they behave like the rest of the internet.

And they talk about what goes on behind the scenes in a publishing house.

I think this is an opportunity and a challenge for editors. Editors the world over are used to being the invisible seamstresses, the silent midwives – and other feminine metaphors that mean you and your work should be invisible, as we preserve idea of author as solo genius. It's just *not done* for an editor to talk publicly about the editorial process. The author can do it if they choose, but when the editor does it, it's verging on a betrayal. At the very least, spilling the beans on behind-the-scenes editing is what Georgette Heyer might call 'bad ton'.

But I think this is changing. And I think to some degree it *should* change.

In this age of self-publishing, when people in the wider world are questioning the value of traditional publishers, I think it pays for editors and publishers to be able to point to what they do and how they help the author and the text. Social media can be a gentle, non-confrontational way for editors to be made visible, to confess to their own tastes and interests, and to respectfully reveal a little of what goes on behind the scenes. And at the same time, to help sell books.

### **3) Feeding the beast**

But once you create a social media space for your company and your books, you have to keep it filled with content. And that's time consuming, and it's hard. To be silent is to be invisible. If books in the series are going to be a year apart, what can you fill that gap with? How can you keep people talking about your property? Is there a short story the author has written that you can release in e-only? Can you involve readers in making choices about covers? Or a character-naming competition you can run? And more content and interaction leads to the expectation of more content and interaction. Marketing campaigns are no longer confined to a number of months before and after a book's release, you are, in essence, marketing everything (or at least your 'big properties') all the time.

The question of who writes this content and how much it's a recognised, and remunerated, part of the job description of editors and others outside marketing is, I think, an ongoing discussion within publishing houses.

### **A word on trends in YA**

I'm wary of trying to identify trends in publishing, because experience tells me that as soon as something exists enough to be a trend, it's probably over. And it maybe only happened by accident anyway. And I've been home for several months now and that's enough time in publishing for trends to dissolve or seem old hat.

But, having said that, here are some swings in fashion that I noticed. These aren't things that are necessarily selling the best, or that readers or booksellers are clamouring for, but they are what editors, for whatever reason, were looking to sign up.

- 1) **Contemporary realism.** Some call this 'dystopia fatigue', others call it 'a return to the heartland of YA', and some others seem to think it's a new genre invented by John Green. Whatever the case, stand-alone contemporary novels – of which we have a long and excellent tradition in this country – are having their moment in the sun. Although I'm not certain anyone has informed the booksellers.
- 2) **Illustrated middle grade fiction** is also much sought after. Advances can be higher now for middle grade than they are for YA fiction. I think we could call this the Wimpy Kid effect.
- 3) Editors also seemed to be publishing a lot of **YA memoir**. This one took me by surprise, and I have no idea why now is the time. I just know that almost everyone I spoke to had a memoir for teenagers somewhere on their upcoming lists. This could in part be a response to the 'Common Core.' Common Core is the new, and controversial, American national



curriculum standards, which are designed to ‘outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade.’ The Common Core standards actively encourage the use of non-fiction in US classrooms, where once fiction might have been more common.

I note this memoir trend is perhaps emerging in Australia, with the Text Prize this year going to a YA memoir. If it continues here (and I, for one, hope it does because I love a good memoir) I’m not sure that there’s a better argument for the globalisation of US YA: we might have to face the fact that our market is being directly influenced by a curriculum change in American schools.

- 4) **Australian books in the USA.** I kept an eagle-eye out for Australian authors during my travels around New York bookstores. And it was pleasing to note that I could always find at least a few familiar names. The ones I ran into most often were: Markus Zusak, Melina Marchetta, Cath Crowley, Fiona Wood, Laura Buzo, Garth Nix, Craig Silvey and Andy Griffiths.

There was a terrific exhibition on at the main branch of the New York Public Library while I was there called ‘The ABC of it: Why Children’s Books Matter’. It was an amazing survey of publishing for children, basically since the beginning of the book, from all over the world. There was a recreation of the Great Green Room from *Good Night Moon*. There were Pooh and Piglet, Kanga, Tigger and Eeyore. I mean the very real actual stuffed animals once owned by Christopher Robin. (Apparently they are in the permanent collection of the New York Public Library, which was a bit of a surprise to me. It seems a bit like transporting Tower Bridge to span the Hudson River.) But there they were, and it was very exciting.

There were only two Australian representatives in the exhibition. PL Travers, author of *Mary Poppins*, who for some reason we don’t tend to

claim, or perhaps she didn't claim us. (The famous umbrella was on display.) And Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, which is published in the US by Arthur Levine at Scholastic. (Who is also famous for being JK Rowling's US editor. A first bound proof of the US edition of the *Sorcerer's Stone* featured in the exhibition, along with a letter from Arthur to booksellers suggesting they hold onto the proof because it would one day be a collector's item. History did not prove him wrong on that one!)

*The Arrival* is obviously an amazing book. An outside-the-box book that defies neat categories. It's a special book all round. But even beyond that, it's not surprising that it has a strong appeal outside Australia. It's a universal story. A migrant story, a city story. The fantastical city could be Sydney, it could be New York, it could be Singapore. But it's also very much its own place. As an Australian, I was pleased and proud to see it in the exhibition.

## **Being an editor in New York**

This section of my report is less focussed on my specific project and more a chance to talk a bit of shop. What is it really like to be an editor in New York?

On the one hand, I found the professional lives of the editors I met to look fairly familiar. The type of people drawn to the job seem to be similar the world over: overwhelmingly women, with a love of words and story, an interest in people, and varying degrees of analytical/pedantic brains... But there were a few notable differences about life as an editor in NYC:

### **1) The level of respect and understanding of the job.**

At home in Australia, whenever I'm asked what I do, the answer 'I'm an editor' seems to elicit one of two responses. Either some variation on 'Would you take a look at my manuscript' or, even more commonly, a sort of blank

incomprehension and a totally lack of interest. ‘Does that mean you correct the grammar and spelling?’

In New York, the city of Gordon Lish and Maxwell Perkins, editing still seems to have some degree of cachet. People are actually impressed when you tell them what you do. I wondered if this was because I was moving in particularly literary circles, but several editors I talked to confirmed that there is still a general level of respect that goes along with working in publishing in New York City.

It’s probably partly because of the deep literary history of the city. Even though high rents are driving independent bookstores out of Manhattan, and the West Coast is developing a lively publishing culture of its own, New York is still the heart of publishing in the USA, with only London, perhaps, to rival it anywhere in the world. Many of the world’s best, and largest, publishing houses are head-quartered in New York. And many of the most admired and beloved books in the world were edited by people inside those very buildings in Manhattan.

It might also be in part because of my next observation:

## **2) ‘Editor’ means ‘commissioning’.**

In Australia, for the most part, the broad job description of ‘editor’ does not involve acquiring books, until you are quite senior and tack ‘commissioning’ on to the front of your title. In most Australian houses, ‘publishers’ are responsible for building and shaping lists, and ‘editors’ work closely with them – and, depending on the house – do varying amounts of the structural editing, line editing, copyediting, author care and project management. Although the path to publishing often leads through being an editor, there are different skill sets and interests involved, and for many editors there is not a direct career path to publisher.

In New York, 'editor' is assumed to mean 'commissioning editor'. Editors acquire books right from the start of their careers. In fact, *editorial assistants* – very junior staff who may be in their first job in publishing – are often encouraged to start acquiring books, even if it's just one or two a year. Several people told me that two years into your first editorial job was about the standard time to acquire your first book.

I wondered about the pressures and expectations that this puts on junior and inexperienced staff. But for the most part, at least in the houses I visited, it seemed a safe, supportive environment to test your wings. At least a couple of senior staff I talked to were horrified when I asked if there was any formal (or even informal) profit expectations or title quotas placed on the acquisitions of junior staff. It seems to be seen more as a chance to start defining your own editorial taste, to firm up your judgement skills, and to start making the all-important connections with agents and authors.

In Australia, publishers often drift away from the craft of editing as they become more senior and move into the publishing role. If you are responsible for the acquisition of a large list, it's impossible to personally edit each book. But in New York, very senior editors still do the actual craft of editing. In many cases, structural and line edits are still done by the person who gives their name to the imprint. This means that the actual nuts and bolts of editing, the structural reports, the line edits, are still held in esteem.

I also found it interesting to note that US houses also have a very strict definition of copyediting, and it is not something done by 'editors' but strictly by 'copyeditors' – who are completely separate from the other stages of book production, and who are highly skilled in that one area. My experience in Australia suggests that we are less rigid in the definitions of the stages of editing, and the roles of the editor. In some cases, I think what we might call a 'copyedit' is much closer to what they call a 'line edit' and what they call a 'copyedit' we might think of as closer to a proofread and preparing the book for the typesetter.

### **3) Editing is a less collaborative exercise than I am used to.**

I know that the experience of Australian editors differ in this, but I am used to working in an environment where ideas are shared, where projects are discussed early and frankly, and where the editor and publisher work closely together during the editorial process.

In NYC, the fact that *everyone* is acquiring books means that there is a level of competition between editors, even within the same house, that I hadn't encountered before. Some houses even allow their editors to bid against each other at auctions. And I heard of one instance where a coin was tossed to decide which editor got to bid on a book.

Even when working for the biggest publishing houses on the planet, many editors I met seemed to work very autonomously. Once you pass the assistant stage, you work almost exclusively on your own books – and, until you are quite senior, you probably don't have an assistant of your own. So as an editor you are essentially alone with your authors and the words.

### **4) Pay and workloads**

Sadly, I didn't find that editors in New York are paid any better than editors back home. In fact, given the high cost of living in that city, the pay scales are possibly even worse. Young (mostly) women with partners employed in better-paying industries are still the norm. This doesn't encourage much diversity within publishing houses – and by extension diversity in the literature acquired. A problem we have in Australia too. But publishing in New York seems actively aware of its diversity problems, with industry committees set up to try to help address these issues.

Because editors at all levels of their careers are actively scouting for books to publish, the level of extra-curricular work – reading, schmoozing, industry-committee joining – done across the board seems mind-boggling. I definitely got the sense that most of the background work that goes into acquisitions, and, in fact, a lot of the actual editing was done outside of hours.

**5) The stereotype of brash and direct New Yorkers could not have been less true in many of the work interactions that I witnessed.**

I sat in on several editorial and acquisitions meetings where editors were asked to pass judgement and give advice on other editors' budding projects. Genuine praise was doled out liberally. 'I love it!' 'You must publish it!' 'Sign it up immediately!' But even mild criticisms or reservations were couched in very careful, sometimes obfuscatory language. I began to learn that any statement that began with a gentle 'If it were me...' or 'Just speaking very personally...' meant the speaker thought the project up for discussion was a total stinker. My questions about this were usually met with laughter and recognition. Everyone knows the game, but it's bad form to be too forthright with negative opinions – even among trusted colleagues with excellent working relationships.

Obviously, all this varies immensely from house to house across a diverse industry, but these observations held true in many houses I visited.

**6) What can Australia learn from the way NYC does things?**

I think that there is a lot to be said for encouraging editors to acquire books at an earlier age or career stage. I think it enriches the editorial job and makes the career path smoother and with fewer seemingly impassable roadblocks. ('Who has to die around here for me to become a commissioning editor?') I also think publishing houses greatly benefit from having young people bring enthusiasm and a fresh world view to their publishing programs.

But it also means that young editors are exposed to high pressures and workloads very early on in their careers. The fact that this can be hard and lonely is, I think, highlighted by the existence of the very well-populated 'Young to Publishing' committee run by the AAP. Among its stated goals it 'strives to give junior employees a chance to build a community outside of

their own publishing houses and to educate themselves about the industry as a whole.'

### **A note on keeping a blog**

I am not the first Beatrice Davis fellow to write a blog. I very much enjoyed keeping up with the travels of Jane Morrow and Alex Nahlous during their times in NYC. Following their lead, I wrote about my experiences at [www.susannahandbeatrice.com](http://www.susannahandbeatrice.com), and I found it extremely valuable for a number of reasons:

- 1) **It was good discipline for me to write up things as I went.** Although the tone was very informal, it allowed me to grow and deepen my ideas. And it served as something of a diary of my time away, allowing me to look back and remember my on-the-spot impressions.
  
- 2) **It was a useful calling card when I was setting up appointments in NYC.** In one handy spot, it gave people an idea of what I was doing, a sense of who I am, and some info about the fellowship itself. And unlike if I had had to put all that info in an email, it gave time-poor New York editors the chance to read and digest as much or as little as they liked.
  
- 3) **It kept people at home in touch with what I was up to.** It was very lovely for me to receive comments and emails from people within the publishing industry in Australia who were reading my blog: colleagues, friends, and many whom I had never met before. It made me feel connected to Australia, and to the larger purpose behind the fellowship.

I highly recommend that future fellows explore some version of a blog or public diary. Maybe even a regular podcast, or vlog. I'd subscribe to that!

## **A few final thoughts**

In drawing together the threads of everything I learned and observed while I was away, I can find few neat conclusions. But there are some rather emotive ideas that I hope to bring back with me into my everyday work and life as an editor of YA in Australia.

### **1) Expectations are important to success, but high expectations are not necessarily broad ones.**

The fact that people across the New York publishing world believe so strongly in Young Adult literature as a thriving, interesting, profitable area of publishing was refreshing and exciting. It takes belief and it takes money to truly make something successful.

But rather than giving light and breathing-room to YA literature as a whole, the boom in Young Adult fiction has in some cases narrowed the pipeline. So while big success is obviously pretty wonderful, and one big book can sustain a publishing house through difficult times, ensuring that smaller books continue to be published, I do think that there is also something to be said for flying under the radar.

So, while I would love Australian publishing to produce its own blockbuster Young Adult literature, and I would really love it to be taken as seriously as it is in the US, I would hate to see us change our definitions of success for YA to include only huge bestsellers.

### **2) Diversity is important.**

I mean this on a number of levels. It's obvious that the lack of diversity in the bookselling scene is a problem for American publishing – and could very well get worse down the track. Long may we support our fabulous bookstores.

It's important for our book industry to maintain **diverse definitions of success**. We need to continue to foster a market in this country where



commercial blockbusters can sit alongside modest-selling award-winners, and we don't call either of them a failure. If our definitions of success become too narrow, I think we will restrict the numbers and the kinds of stories that can be told, and we will end up shrinking the market.

**Diversity of format** is also important. In an age of accessible media and divided attention spans, books will continue to be relevant to young people as long as we keep our definition of 'the book' broad: so that we foster all kinds of stories, being told by all kinds of people, reaching all kinds of readers in a multitude of ways. (Although, note to self: no one has had any luck at all with enhanced ebooks. Just don't even bother.)

And it's important that literature, especially for young people, **properly reflects our rich and interesting world**, where we are not all the same race, or gender, or sexual orientation or ability... or nationality. In order for Young Adult literature to continue to thrive, young people who walk into bookstores need to find books that are mirrors that reflect and make sense of their actual lives, and also books that are gateways to worlds they've never dreamed of.

We need to have the courage to keep publishing our own stories, Australian stories, Australian voices. If I left for New York with a burning desire to know how and why their YA books were selling so much more than ours, and how we could revolutionise our industry to match, I came home with the fire to keep doing what we do so well as an industry, to keep supporting local authors, to keep believing that strong sellers can be built from strongly literary and accessible books, even if they aren't going to be the next *Hunger Games*, the next *The Fault in Our Stars*. And who knows; this is publishing, so maybe they will be— especially if we believe!

(‘Except for John Green – *decrescendo*’ ...)