

BEATRICE DAVIS EDITORIAL FELLOWSHIP

REPORT: 2000-2001

Jo Jarrah

CONTENTS

Thanks	3
Three months in one page	4
My intentions and what happened to them	5
What I actually did	11
Boston: Beacon Press	11
New York: The Feminist Press	20
Visits to other publishers	28
Seminars, readings and other events attended	32
Books acquired	36
Two or three things I learned for sure	39
Memoirs/life writing	39
E-book publishing	46
The market for Australian books	48
All things considered	50
Resources for future Fellowship recipients	51
Financial report	52

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THREE MONTHS IN ONE PAGE

This page summarises my three-month experience for those without the time and/or inclination to read my report in detail.

My purpose in going to the US was to look at the editing and publishing of 'life writing' and, in particular, the memoirs and autobiography of 'ordinary' people rather than celebrities. I was also keen to have a deep rather than broad experience, so I planned to spend most of my time with my host publishers rather than having meetings with as many publishers as I could. This meant it was important to find host publishers with a commitment to a list of this kind. They turned out to be very thin on the ground, although of course everyone wants the next Frank McCourt or Dave Eggers. After some helpful advice from those who knew the US scene, I approached Beacon Press in Boston and The Feminist Press in New York, both of whom have a cross-cultural memoir series as an important part of their list. Fortunately, both were happy to have me.

At the time of my visit I was more than a little unlucky with the exchange rate (50 cents to US\$1), and so it turned out with my hoped-for mentors. Both host publishers had undergone crucial staff changes shortly before my arrival in the US which, to cut a long story short, resulted in the absence of editors who had worked on these kinds of books. Nor were there many of these books in the process during my time there.

Despite this, my Beacon Press experience was great. I was set to finding new titles for them, which gave me the opportunity to do some research on the US market, and I was included in all of Beacon's meetings, which I found extremely valuable. The Feminist Press worked out less well – what I felt I needed to do to use my time wisely didn't really dovetail with what they hoped I would do for them. In the end I spent increasingly less time at the press and more time meeting with editors and publishers from other houses, as well as going to as many memoir-related events as possible, and reading (yes, reading, despite the guilt I had to overcome) as many of the published memoirs as I could.

In all, these three months were unquestionably the most enriching, rewarding, and inspiring of my professional life (as well as personally – to mangle an old slogan, for editors the personal is so often professional). The Beatrice Davis Fellowship provides an invaluable experience for Australian editors; this opportunity to develop our skills greatly benefits the whole publishing industry in Australia. Thank you, again, to the sponsors and supporters. (And a tip for future recipients: the only scary or dangerous thing about New York and the Fellowship is the withdrawal process once it's over!)

MY INTENTIONS AND WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM

Aside from a desire to experience publishing New York style, a desire most Australian editors probably share, I wanted to do two things in particular: I wanted to look at how 'life writing' is edited and published in the US, and I wanted a deep rather than broad experience, by which I mean I wanted to work closely with my host publisher/s rather than spending time visiting lots of other publishers and agents.

LIFE WRITING

The kind of life writing I wanted to look at encompassed memoirs, autobiography, biography and reality-based (or meta, as some call it) fiction, written by and about people who are 'ordinary' rather than celebrities. Although I have always been a keen reader of this genre, I had only edited perhaps half a dozen titles of this kind during my first ten or so years in trade publishing. That changed five years ago when, after doing the Australian edit on Geraldine Brooks's *Foreign Correspondence* (winner of the 1999 Nita B Kibble Award), I found a lot more memoirs on my desk, both while I was in-house at Transworld/Random House Australia and since going freelance again in January 2000. I found that I really liked working on these manuscripts, and seemed to have something to contribute.

In fact it is an enormous privilege, challenge and (if the outcome is successful) reward to step into someone else's life and help the author with the telling of it, particularly if they are not a writer or celebrity, but just an 'ordinary' person with an extraordinary life story. And it's probably no coincidence that in our increasingly globalised, electronic world, readers seem to have a greater hunger than ever for 'life stories', especially if they're about people with whom they can identify or, at least, from whom they can learn a bit more about themselves (and especially if the stories are well told). *Angela's Ashes*, of course, is a prime example of this, but there are many others. At the time of my application I believed it was a genre set to grow, and I still do, with some reservations. I very much wanted to increase my skills in developing this kind of book.

While life writing presents many editorial challenges in common with other kinds of narrative (page-turning structure/'plot', appropriate linguistic style and

voice, etc), for an editor it has, in addition, a number of unique characteristics. These are what interested me most and formed the basis of what I wanted to explore in the US (the champion, it seemed to me, of making a success of the ordinary person's story in print):

- The ethical issue: How do we best help an author draw from the life (theirs or their subject's) in a way that will make the book honest and compelling without overstepping the limit and perhaps even damaging them, in the 'real' world or psychologically? How much of ourselves do we share to create trust and maximise the author's openness without them feeling too exposed, or that it's a one-way street?
- The cultural difference issue: Aside from celebrities, many life writers are in, or have experienced, a marginalised position in relation to mainstream society, perhaps because of poverty (emotional as well as material), race or nationality, gender or sexuality—or a combination of these. How can we as editors develop the necessary sensitivity to help create a work that will have the widest possible readership without compromising the integrity of the author or subject?
- The voice issue: Especially for one- (or two-) book authors, how can we encourage the highest possible prose quality without 'overwriting' their voice? Even with ghost-written biographies, how do we best maintain the subject's voice while striving for overall literary quality?
- The one-off issue: What are the implications of the fact that many life writers will only produce one book? Does this impact on how it is published and the way we work as editors? How do we find one-off authors to begin with?
- The legal issue: Life writers by their very genre have to 'name' others in the telling of their story in a way not faced by fiction writers, even reality-based ones. With the increasingly litigious response to publishing in Australia, how does this affect how we can best do our work as editors?
- The marketing issue: Australians are increasingly interested in 'ordinary' stories not just from overseas but about Australians. As Australian stories become just as fascinating and well written as overseas titles, how can we

best market our life stories across the Pacific, and what significance does this have for the work we do as editors?

In short, my primary interest was in the literary and linguistic craft of editing and writing, and also the psychological craft of eliciting the very best work from authors who may not be writers (but who almost always have sensitive backgrounds) in order to give them, and the publisher, the widest possible readership.

DEEP VS BROAD EXPERIENCE

Given the nature of the issues I felt to be most important, it made sense to me to plan on spending the precious time available working side by side with editors who were as experienced as possible in this kind of publishing. While three months may seem a long time, I knew the weeks would disappear faster than a hot chip chucked to a seagull, and I thought my time would be most usefully spent working intensively in-house, where serendipitous things can happen, rather than visiting a whole lot of people at other publishing houses who may or may not share something valuable with me. While previous Fellowship recipients mostly had impressively long lists of contacts they had made, meeting lots of people seemed very much in keeping with the broader nature of their projects. I figured that *my* best bet was to try to stay as close as possible to the in-house editor/s I'd be working with, to develop a relationship with them and hopefully get to experience, at first-hand and in as much detail as possible, how they go about developing the kinds of memoirs I was interested in.

(I must say, too, that this was an uncomfortable decision. Although it felt 'right' in terms of my project, there is a strong perception among many Fellowship applicants and some previous recipients that having lots of meetings with US editors and agents is a condition of the Fellowship, regardless of how useful these meetings might be to the individual's project: in fact there's a largely unspoken but very real pressure to do even better (ie have more names on one's list) than the previous recipient in order to be thought of as having made a proper fist of the award. This is a shame, and I include this aside here for the benefit of future recipients.)

Given the approach I wanted to take, I felt it was important to find a host publisher with a commitment to life writing. This turned out to be more difficult than I had expected. In fact none of the major houses, or even most of the

independents that I was aware of, actively publish a memoir list, nor does any individual editor or publisher see 'memoir' as a category that they specialise in or focus on in the same way they might fiction, or true crime, or popular science. All houses publish memoirs, of course, and they all hope to publish Frank McCourt's successor, whoever that might be, but the reasons for a particular memoir ending up with a particular editor and house are, in the main, the same as they are for any other general trade title: the contacts of a particular editor, perhaps, or the size of the advance or the appeal of the marketing and publicity plan . . . maybe the house's track record in getting attention for commercial vs literary vs socially progressive kinds of titles . . .

Guided by Mary Cunnane, whose links with US publishing remain strong despite her move down under, I discovered Beacon Press in Boston, and The Feminist Press in New York. Both houses have a memoir series as a defining component of their overall list, both series are cross-cultural in orientation (which I assumed would make them more relevant to my work in Australia), and both publish the 'ordinary' rather than celebrity memoir. I also felt that their smaller size and relative independence would be an added bonus, making it more likely that I would be able to engage in their activities in a deeper way than perhaps was possible for some of the previous Fellowship recipients in some of their placements. I also felt it might make their problems a little more akin to problems experienced by local publishing programs and independent houses in Australia.

While most people I spoke to in the Australian industry couldn't quite place Beacon Press (who in fact have an awesome backlist and won US Publisher of the Year in 1993), and almost everyone confused The Feminist Press with the UK's Women's Press, nonetheless these two houses felt right for my project. After email introductions, thanks to Mary Cunnane, and after I had submitted supporting materials to them at their request, they agreed to take me on board. Flying over on 7 March, I was to spend a month at Beacon Press followed by two months at The Feminist Press.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

Good intentions often go awry. Just as I suffered some bad luck with the exchange rate (50 Aussie cents, sometimes a bit less, to the US dollar at the time of my visit), so it turned out with my hoped-for mentors. Beacon's executive editor, Deanne Urmy, had been with the press for ten years and was responsible

for the acquisition and editorial development of most of the really interesting and successful memoirs they had published, especially in the last five or so years. Unfortunately, Deanne had left Beacon to go to Houghton Mifflin a mere *two weeks* before my arrival in Boston. While I was very comfortably set up in her office, it was no consolation for her absence: well don't speak, after all. Because Houghton Mifflin are also located in Boston, she was kind enough to meet with me briefly (about forty-five minutes) despite being extremely busy at that point. It was a very intense meeting (I had a lot of time to make up for), and one of the most valuable meetings of my trip.

Of course there were other editors at Beacon but only one, editorial director Deb Chasman, had had the kind of experience I was looking to understudy, and she was overseas – at the London Book Fair and then on vacation – for more than two weeks of my stay. Before and after her trip she was frantically busy, so our time together was very limited. Beacon's very impressive director, Helene Atwan (ex Farrar, Straus & Giroux, among others), was also a fount of great wisdom, but had even less time to spare. The two editors (there are usually three, but one had left and hadn't yet been replaced) were delightful, but also very young and lacking experience in memoir editing and publishing.

Despite these setbacks, my time at Beacon Press was put to very good use. I elaborate later in this report on what I actually did there, so will only say here that it provided a very good introduction to the US market and the operations of a small but very successful independent publisher.

The absence of mentors in-house also pushed me to meet with people from other publishing houses, and to scout around for memoir-related literary events. Although the former wasn't what I had planned to do, this change in my thinking was to prove essential in New York, where the disappearing mentor phenomenon continued.

The Feminist Press was founded twenty-seven years ago by the redoubtable Florence Howe, who had run it until just two months before my arrival, when she semi-retired, handing the directorship to Jean Casella, who had been editorial and rights manager there for the previous five or six years. Florence was away working on a project in Africa for all but two days of my stay at the press, Jean was overwhelmingly busy and often out of the office, and the two senior editors were both new: one had come from a small academic press, the other from an even smaller (three titles per year) independent press, and neither had any significant experience with memoirs.

Compounding this setback was what I can only call a misalignment of needs and expectations. On hearing that I'd be at The Feminist Press for my New York experience, one very senior Boston editor commented with dismay: 'My god – they'll work you like a dog.' At the time, most of me dismissed this remark as the result of inter-house rivalry, but in fact it was prescient. While I wasn't treated like a dog (and the Fellowship *is* work, after all, not play), I did find that the press, which is chronically under-resourced, relies heavily on college-student interns to accomplish a lot of its administrative work. Again, I elaborate on the details of this later in the report. Here I will simply say that by the end of my first week I doubted that what they needed me to do would be of much benefit to my project, and by the second week I was certain of it. Despite the advice to 'get out now' of the extremely wise Australian agent in whom I confided via email, I felt ethically obligated to my host publisher, so it took me a few more weeks and a seriously burned hand (of which more later) to reduce my time with the press to almost nil, instead seeing as many other people in publishing as I could, reading memoirs and attending memoir-related events in the hope of gleaning knowledge that way.

Of course, I now regret not changing tack sooner as it would have allowed me to be more prepared and focused in my meetings with other editors and publishers. Instead of having the time to find out about and read memoirs on their list before going to see them, it usually happened the other way around. While I always tried to direct the meetings to the topic of memoirs as quickly as I could, few people could spare more than about forty minutes, too much of which was taken up with their need to get a handle on who I was. Discussion of memoir editing was consequently more general than I wanted it to have been.

My time in New York was nonetheless incredibly valuable, there's no mistake about that. I guess I just wanted to describe this process at some length for the benefit of future recipients: do have a plan B (especially if you have a project as precise as mine was), do put it into action sooner rather than later if things aren't working out, and do withdraw from the host publisher if necessary, explaining how important this Fellowship is to the editors fortunate enough to receive it: after all, for most of us it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to explore some aspect of editing and publishing that we just otherwise can't fit into our busy lives at the coalface. Oh, and I also wanted to explain to you why my contact list is so long, even though I had promised myself (and future recipients, depending on their projects) that it wouldn't be.

WHAT I ACTUALLY DID

This section describes in detail what I did and didn't do, tries to give some of the flavour of the whole experience, not just the work experience, and lists the people with whom I had meetings as well as the relevant memoir-related and other publishing events I attended.

BOSTON

Not having been to the US before, I planned my arrival carefully and heeded the advice of those who had gone before (including the bit about the first day's impressions counting, so don't arrive jet-lagged). Aware that, according to some sources, Boston has a higher crime rate than New York, which rated only 144th on the list of bad cities at the time, I planned to arrive in daylight – mid-afternoon to be exact – especially as I had been reduced by the ghastly exchange rate to staying at the Berkeley YWCA for the month, and by nature Ys seem to gravitate to the more edgy areas of town.

Well, as with exchange rates and intentions, so with plans...I can't tell you how challenging were my first few hours in the US. I don't really need to re-live them here (or anywhere else, hopefully), so suffice to say that when I first arrived around lunchtime on 8 March, American Eagle Airlines, with whom I was meant to connect to my Boston flight within an hour of my arrival at JFK, were having a 'few problems' with their maintenance staff, as a result of which I had to wait seven hours before they decided to bus me and the other fifteen or so people in the same 'boat' from JFK to La Guardia so we could catch a Boston shuttle with a different airline altogether. In the process they 'misplaced' my luggage. If only the pain had stopped there.

It was pitch black, Boston airport – like the city itself – was deserted, and me and the recently arrived Jamaican in the lone taxi didn't speak the same English. Of course, although it was technically spring, I had managed to hit Boston just two days after their worst blizzard since 1978. Snow on the sidewalks (as they say) was piled up to the height of an adult human being, with tiny one-person and car-width thoroughways scraped into the footpaths and roads. No wonder the only people I saw on the streets were the three or four wild-eyed homeboys I nervously passed on my way to the corner store to get some dinner (the Y stops serving food at 7pm, and by this time it was way closer to midnight than 7pm).

Did I say dinner? Somehow it seems strangely fitting that my first meal on US soil should consist of a packet of peanuts, the only recognisably edible thing I could find in the corner store. At least they went down well with the duty-free gin – I know it should have been whisky, in deference, but then my talent is not a dot on the Fellowship’s namesake’s. After an hour or two of liquid contemplation, my little YWCA cell – complete with its anciently stained dark brown lino, chocolate brown nylon bedspread, lime green vinyl chair, rickety, cigarette-burned ‘dresser’, and lack of any kind of plumbing facilities – seemed positively salubrious. And there were no bugs in the bed. I was ready.

Beacon Press

On my first day at the press, the entire editorial department of seven took me out to lunch, including the editorial director, who was about to depart for the London Book Fair the next day and was clearly frantically busy. It’s tempting to say they took pity on me, knowing where I was staying in Boston, but in truth it was simply indicative of the warm welcome they provided and the extremely generous way they involved me in all aspects of the press’s activities.

Although most people I spoke to in the Australian industry couldn’t quite place Beacon Press, in fact it has a very distinguished 150-year history of progressive publishing, winning New England Publisher of the Year in 1992, and *Literary Marketplace’s* US Publisher of the Year in 1993. To be honest, I was just a tad intimidated approaching them for a placement as they have an awesome backlist which includes many titles that were seminal for me in my own development: James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son*, Herbert Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man*, Ghandi’s *An Autobiography*, Jean Baker Miller’s *Toward a New Psychology of Women* and Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology*, just to name a few. Beacon Press continues to publish ground-breaking bestsellers by the likes of Marian Wright Edelman, Cornel West and Geoffrey Canada, although the success of these authors has not crossed US borders in the same way as the earlier titles mentioned.

While Beacon Press comes under the umbrella of the Unitarian Universalist religious organisation in the US, in fact it operates quite separately and is housed in its own building at 41 Mt Vernon Street, just a block back from the main Beacon Street building which fronts Boston Common. Although technically Beacon Press is a not-for-profit publisher, and representatives of the church sit on the board, in every practical sense the press operates exactly as a commercial trade publisher. Each title is costed as precisely as possible, the aim being for a

minimum 55% margin in order to cover overheads and have funds to plough back into its publishing program.

(A good example of their canny commercial approach and utter professionalism occurred not all that long before I arrived. Two years earlier they had published a book by Michael Patrick MacDonald called *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie* (subtitled *Growing Up in Boston's Irish Ghetto* in the original, 1999 hardcover edition). It is a harrowing and totally gripping memoir of growing up in the poor Irish area of South Boston in the 1960s during the bussing riots, by an activist who was instrumental in setting up Boston's gun buy-back program. It was a bestseller and Book of the Month Club selection – so successful in fact that mainstream houses vied for paperback rights. Recognising their own strengths and limitations, Beacon Press sold paperback rights to Ballantine, a more lucrative option in the long term than publishing the paperback themselves, and also one guaranteed to give the author's work greater exposure. A year later, during my stay in Boston, it was still always in the top ten bestseller list.)

Apart from working financially, Beacon Press titles must be relevant to the ideological charter of the umbrella organisation. While there is a lot of flexibility about the kinds of titles that get the go-ahead at publishing meetings, broadly speaking the books they publish must address some socially important issue and do so in a way that advances thinking and debate about that issue. Beacon Press is politically and socially a very progressive publisher, and this always underlies all of the work they publish. To quote from their publishing guidelines: 'Beacon Press promotes works of advocacy, scholarship, literature, and spiritual inquiry to inform a broad readership about the urgent issues of our time – including social justice, education, racial and ethnic diversity, religious pluralism, our relationship to the natural world, and the importance of the arts in civil society.'

Beacon publishes around 80 titles per year, about half of which are original and half are reissues, such as new editions and paperback editions of hardbacks, either from their own list or of titles to which they have bought paperback rights from other publishers. The press has an active backlist of about 300 titles, and these constitute an important part of their revenue stream.

Beacon Press operates with a staff of twenty-eight, although they're holding off on replacing one or two positions at the moment because, as for most US publishers, sales have been markedly down the last financial year (except for children's books, which Beacon don't publish). Apart from the director and her

assistant, there are five in finance/operations, an intern program coordinator, three in production, eight (usually) in editorial, four in sales and marketing, three in publicity and two in the art department. Their distribution is handled by Houghton Mifflin, who are also based in Boston (and are one of the only two remaining major publishers who are independent, the other being Norton).

Titles come to or are found by the press in all the usual ways: agented submissions, active commissioning and the occasional slush pile manuscript if there is something or someone to recommend it in the covering letter. Beacon Press is a little different, too, in that it actively seeks the rights to republish titles that did pretty well for their original publishers (usually but not always small independents) say, five years ago, but whose sales have fallen right off. Of course, such titles are only pursued if the press feels the book would still do well given the right kind of positioning in the market. They have had some quite staggering success with this approach, the resurrection of Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* perhaps being a classic example. In fact my major project for the press was to search for precisely such titles.

In relation to the process, a title (properly costed) is contracted only after its publication has been agreed to by a small publishing committee, consisting mainly of the key senior staff, with the press's director, who is also the publishing director, having the final say. And as in most US publishing houses, the acquiring editor is then responsible for doing all the developmental and structural work on the manuscript, including much of the work that a manuscript editor, whether freelance or in-house, would be expected to do in Australia. Copy-editing — the other bit of what Australian editors do, and what many in the US call line editing — is considered, at least at Beacon Press, to be more akin to proofreading, and is in their case part of the production process. In fact when I first arrived at the press I was astonished to find that the managing editor was one of the production rather than editorial staff, and reported to the production manager (an arrangement I'm sure some Australian production managers would love to see here).

(In fact this approach was not unique to Beacon Press. Little, Brown — a wholly a Boston-based publisher until bought out by Time Warner — run their acquisitions activities, including developmental work and structural editing, from New York. Their nine-person editorial department, however, is still located in Boston, along with IT, accounts and customer service — which kind of speaks for itself. Then again, maybe it's a Boston thing...)

At Beacon Press typesetting is done out of house, mainly by just one company, and printing is done mainly offshore as publication schedules generally allow it and it is more cost effective for them. Covers and text design are mainly done in-house, although overflow is outsourced. The production department at Beacon is so well organised and run that the manager is able to devote a considerable amount of time to e-book production, something I found that most US publishers were seriously getting into, not with the hype of, say, six or so years ago, but in a steadfastly committed way, because they want to get as much experience in this medium as possible. The writing is on the wall (though hard to read), but more of this later in this report.

Editorial, design and production standards are very high. Editing is still seen as very important unlike, perhaps, in some of the larger houses, and is duly allowed for. Perhaps this is because backlist titles are an important part of Beacon's revenue, whereas many larger publishers are becoming increasingly frontlist – and what do the words between the covers actually matter if the title is only on the shelves for a few weeks? At Beacon, a great deal of attention is also paid to design, and usually as much is spent on the internal design as the cover – in fact the art director seemed slightly horrified when I described the Australian move to template design for internals.

One last comment I wanted to make in this section relates to the lengths acquisitions editors will go to in order to develop manuscripts to which they are committed. From previous Fellowship recipients, among other sources, I was already aware that a typical US editor has little time in the course of the normal workday to actually edit their manuscripts. This is something that routinely happens in their 'own' time, in the evenings and on weekends – and presumably they are well recompensed in one way or another, although I suspect not. However, I was very struck to learn that in the course of writing *All Souls* (mentioned above), the author, whose hours reflected the chaos of his life, would not only arrive in his editor's office late in the afternoon to discuss his day's work, but would often *sleep* in her office until she arrived back the next morning, gave him breakfast and encouraged him to *go home*, as Tracy Ullman says. While this may not be typical of the commitment seen as necessary to the success of a title (though in this case it turned out to be very bestselling indeed), it's also not entirely unusual, whether or not the manuscript is agented.

What I did at Beacon Press

As I said at the beginning of the section on Beacon Press, I was made extremely welcome there. Despite my disappointment at discovering that Deanne Urmy – the executive editor who had been with the press for ten years and was responsible for acquiring and editing some of their most successful memoirs, including *All Souls* referred to above – had left to go to Houghton Mifflin just two tiny weeks before I arrived, nevertheless my experience at Beacon couldn't have been bettered.

In fact I was set up in Deanne's very comfortable office (her replacement wasn't due until the week after I was to leave), connected to the press's intranet within an hour of my arrival so that I could have access to all the press's electronic correspondence (the IT guy actually apologised for not having me connected *before* I arrived), and given the freedom to access whatever editorial files I felt would be helpful, as well as carte blanche to talk to whoever could spare the time, an invitation I made good use of. I was also welcome to attend all the press's various meetings which, far from being a waste of time as so many meetings are, I found very informative. Invariably the staff, at every level in the hierarchy, were generous to a fault with their time and knowledge, something I didn't particularly expect and was/am deeply appreciative of.

As my major, ongoing task I was given the brief by the incredibly impressive director, Helene Atwan (ex Farrar Straus & Giroux), to seek new titles for their Bluestreak list. Bluestreak is Beacon's imprint for innovative literary writing by women of all colours (although in practice this has meant African-American, Asian-American and Hispanic-American writers). Essentially it's a paperback reprint series that picks up titles that have been published previously (either in hardback or paperback, and from both Beacon's frontlist and from other publishers' lists) to give high quality fiction and memoir/ auto/biography another lease of life, and possibly a place on school, college or reading group lists. It was established about five years ago, so far has around twenty-five titles on the list, and includes authors such as Octavia E. Butler, Gayl Jones, Ruthanne Lum McCunn, Joanna Russ (they have successfully resurrected her landmark *The Female Man*), Sonia Sanchez and Sindiwe Magona.

Of course the likelihood of my seriously coming up with anything in a month (or ever, really – although in the midlist of my mind I will continue to be on the lookout for Beacon Press for quite some time to come) was remote, but it provided a purpose and focus to my research, which psychologically – and also

in practical ways — was very helpful. To this end I spent much of my Boston month researching and trying to get a handle on the titles ‘out there’ in the US market and beyond. My main tools were online and included bookstores such as Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Borders, as well as publishing resources like Bowker’s Literary Marketplace, Ingram’s ipage, and independent/international resources such as Interlink. I also read titles (some more thoroughly than others) in the Beacon list to increase my precise understanding of the nature of what they publish. I did leave them with a couple of possibles — how likely they are, I don’t know.

As well as searching for possible Bluestreak titles, I read and reported on manuscripts under consideration, fortunately serious ones rather than the slush pile, and often, though not always, memoir-related — in fact one was a treatise on the ethics of genetic engineering and other medical and scientific practices by Canadian-resident Australian author Margaret Somerville (highly praised by Paul Davies).

And then there were the meetings. Every week I attended a general staff meeting that lasted thirty or so minutes. In the time I was there, everyone came, only once was someone late (oh how glorious is a meeting that starts on time!), and in them only the important information was passed on about what was happening, whether it was late delivery of a manuscript, an award or other significant event in the life of an author, production changes or problems, publicity or marketing coups. At the end of the meeting covers-in-progress were shown and discussed, but only those whose input was crucial remained for that segment.

Other meetings were held less frequently. In the course of my placement I was fortunate enough to attend a reprint meeting, a print and bind meeting, the monthly digital publishing strategy meeting and an extra cover approval meeting. There are no production meetings as such — production updates, requests, reminders and deadlines are done via a weekly electronic email on the intranet. The only meeting category I didn’t experience during my placement was an editorial one — because the editorial director was overseas for most of my month at Beacon, acquisitions and editorial meetings were held informally — but I was lucky enough to be at Beacon Press during the time of their fall season sales conference, where they presented their main list to some sixty-odd Houghton Mifflin sales staff and reps, HM being their distributor.

The other, serendipitous, meeting series I experienced at Beacon relates to their intern program. Part of Beacon’s commitment is to developing the

publishing skills of ‘people of color’, and they take it as seriously as it deserves (in my meetings with the higher echelons of publishers, I came across only three people who were not Anglo, although in the US, especially New York, the front desk staff were almost always black). At Beacon the program for training non-Anglos — about six for each of the two main seasons — is very carefully considered (in fact they have a staff member devoted to it), so it goes without saying that the program experienced by their interns goes way further than the photocopier and mail room. Part of the program at Beacon involved Monday ‘brown bag lunches’, during which the interns were addressed by each head of department in turn. The materials and information shared at these lunchtime ‘lectures’ were outstanding in anyone’s terms. I went to them all, and it was almost as great a learning experience as my one-to-one meetings with those same heads of departments.

In all, far from finding them tedious or remotely bureaucratic, I was deeply impressed by the meetings held at Beacon Press. Not only did I learn a great deal, but I was very taken with how much can be accomplished in a very short time if meetings are well-used. Of course, I also appreciate that, with a total staff of just twenty-eight, it is far more possible for meetings to be a highly productive tool than it is for larger trade publishers. I was lucky enough during my New York time to be able to attend a Pocket Books editorial meeting — twenty-one editorial staff, plus one rights manager (about which, more later). Very hard to imagine how general staff meetings can be effective when employee numbers are so high.

Activities outside Beacon Press were more limited than in New York. There are few trade publishers of any significance in Boston, but Houghton Mifflin and half of Little, Brown are there, and I met with people from both houses. I was also taken to lunch (at the Harvard Faculty Club, no less) by Harvard University Press’s senior editor for behavioural sciences.

Book-related events were similarly thin on the ground, but I managed to get to perhaps half a dozen, and all were interesting. From many of the US memoirs I was reading, it seemed that geographical place is a much more profound determinant of people’s lives and identities than it is in Australia, so I was particularly drawn to book events that addressed related issues. Most notable of these were two that dealt with the Columbia Point housing project, so notorious in the seventies that even ambulances wouldn’t enter the area without a police escort. Another fascinating event was a packed-out PEN forum on electronic rights, held in the wake of the *Boston Globe*’s sacking of journalists who refused

to automatically assign the newspaper electronic rights to their work. As the forum was held during the first Rosetta vs Random House hearing, much interesting (not to mention heated) discussion centred on book publishing.

As for the bookstores – my god! There are more of them in Boston than you can poke a stick at in a month of sales conferences. Maybe Boston is especially ripe with them because it's home to more than twenty tertiary education institutions, from Harvard and Tufts to Radcliff and MIT. That might also explain why I found the range of titles incredibly impressive, far more so than in the superstores in New York. I only saw four Australian titles on the shelves (though I'm sure there are more): Richard Flanagan's *Sound of One Hand Clapping*, in a downtown Borders; Tracey Cox's *Hot Sex* and *Hot Relationships* in one of those funky Urban Outfitter stores (this one in Harvard Square) that has a bit of everything, from lava lamps to elephant trunk shower heads; plus, marked down to \$1.98 on a specials table in Harvard Coop Bookstore, a Harcourt Brace title: *Gender Relations in Australia*, by a trio of Aussie academics.

Boston in a bagel

Apart from the unpleasantness of trying to clean one's teeth in the morning while a matter of inches away someone else's digestive system is disagreeing violently with their previous night's dinner (an all too frequent occurrence, unfortunately), the YWCA on the whole was an enriching experience. Boston's short-term rental prices are not substantially lower than New York's, so staying at the Y, with breakfast and dinner part of the deal, certainly achieved its aim of conserving scarce funds for the New York leg of my Fellowship, even though the unusual dinner hours (5-7pm) meant I missed a lot of meals. No-one in the industry seemed to expect to come back to my place for drinks (in fact it seems people don't do the lunch or drinks thing like they once did), and because most of the women at the Y were medium to long stayers, often with 'interesting' social problems, it gave me an opportunity to experience a bit not only of the 'real' America, but of the very people whose stories I was interested in as memoirs.

Despite being unable to follow my project plans, I feel I couldn't have had a better initial placement than Beacon Press: their inclusion of me in all their activities together with their relatively small size meant that I quickly gained a good understanding of their operations. The director also had a clear and appropriate idea of what I was there for, and the work I did provided an excellent

orientation to the US publishing scene. While activities outside the press were limited, I certainly made the most of them.

As for the weather, what can I say? I don't know how anyone who wasn't born and bred in New England for several generations can abide winter after winter (or even a single winter) there. I'm so grateful that a New York friend of a friend advised me just two weeks before I left Sydney to wear shoes with good traction, something you wouldn't usually find among the wardrobe must-haves of anyone who lives in Sydney. Not someone to do things by halves, I got a pair of Cats (the Caterpillar people. You know – they make earth-moving equipment, and shoes from the leftover rubber) and I thank from my heart both friends for the absence of many potentially broken leg and arm and back and other assorted body parts.

NEW YORK

The snow still lay on the ground, at least in the shadier places, when I headed for New York on 9 April, just over four weeks after arriving in Boston. I have to say I had been itching to go for some time, mainly because publishing activities in Boston are so limited, but also because I could count on one hand the number of nose-rings and tattoos and creative hairstyles I'd seen in all that time. And not one poster stuck on a street pole. Apart from the odd feral pocket around MIT, Boston is a very controlled, colourless kind of city.

Unfortunately, my 'second' arrival was different but no better than my first. I came down to New York from Boston by train, primarily to conserve precious funds, but also figuring it was an opportunist way to see some of the countryside. The train trip was indeed gorgeous, all along the Rhode Island and Connecticut coasts, but the pleasure stopped right at Penn Station. There's a hellhole, even if they have cleaned out most of the drug dealers. Cutting a very long story short again, I found myself in the bowels of Penn Station with one large suitcase, one smallish one, a cardboard box full of books, a backpack and my 'big girly' handbag facing a 'closed' sign at the one and only elevator that would take me up to street level and taxis. In the end what convinced me to make a move was the thought that I couldn't spend my entire two New York months in the belly of Penn Station. So I faced the escalator, trying to line up my baggage, pushing one suitcase, box atop, before me, and dragging my major suitcase behind. I waited for a break in the heavy pedestrian traffic, and started to roll, part of me even optimistically thinking that someone might offer to help

me once they saw my predicament... How wrong can an editor be? Not only did no-one offer help but three separate people pushed in front of me when I was literally an inch from shoving my load onto the escalator. I quickly got over my initial reaction (make way for them) and thought, well fuck you – welcome to New York, Jo! The good news is, it was all the way up from there...almost.

When I hit my apartment the place seemed seriously wild – heaps of people were hanging out on the streets (on a Monday afternoon!), yelling at each other and looking generally no-good to my Boston-acclimatised eyes. Help, I thought. It wasn't until a day or two later that I realised I'd arrived on the first real spring day of New York 2001. It must have been at least 30 degrees Celsius – I sure was sweating in my Boston gear.

Not knowing this about the unseasonable weather, next day I was sufficiently nervous about facing the streets alone to use some of the 'medication' my GP had given me in case of back injury. And so determined was I to appear inviolable, I immediately adopted a don't-mess-with-me street swagger that was apparently convincing enough for two separate people (both Americans) to ask *me* for directions less than twenty-four hours after I'd arrived. (Even funnier is that I knew the answers. In fact I was asked for directions, usually by Americans, on a daily basis for the rest of my stay, and I almost always knew the answer – a result of being so determined not to be seen reading a map on the streets that at night I'd spend a bunch of time memorising whole neighbourhoods I had to visit the next day. Future Fellowship recipients, please note: while it may have enabled me to assist a lot of lost visitors, this extreme caution was quite unnecessary. You see people reading maps on the streets all the time without anyone ever giving them a second glance, let alone a mugging.)

Despite the AUD5000 per month price tag, my first-floor apartment was miniscule (even by inner-city Sydney 'loft' standards) and poorly equipped (see financial report), but it was clean and bright, had a wonderfully eccentric 'super' (of which, more later) and was in a neighbourhood that more than compensated for my Boston Y sojourn. NoLita, the highly successful invention of local real estate agents, occupies a tiny patch carved out of SoHo and the Lower East Side in downtown Manhattan. It's made up of a few blocks south of Houston, between Broadway and the Bowery, within a stroll of Greenwich Village to the north, and the wonderful food markets of Chinatown and Little Italy to the south (in fact the art director at Beacon Press, who'd lived in New York most of her life, assured me I was in the safest place in Manhattan because the Mafia still runs the area, and keeps all the 'goons' out). Parisi's, the Italian bakery where Frank Sinatra

always got his bread (or had it flown to wherever he was staying when he wasn't actually in Manhattan), was just a few doors down the road from me in Mott Street. Heaven can't be any better than this.

Suffice to say, when I got home from my first day in New York, having reconnoitred the subway, found my office on the corner of 34th and Fifth, diagonally opposite the Empire State Building, and checked out my local neighbourhood, I was smitten. It took another five days for me to become totally and utterly besotted, a condition from which I am yet (if ever) to recover. I can tell you now that the most dangerous aspect of New York is the pain of the readjustment period once the Fellowship is over.

The Feminist Press

The Feminist Press — which many confuse with the UK's Women's Press — is an independent publisher run via a 22-member board of directors drawn from academia, publishing and community organisations. Although it is housed in the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), it is not part of the university. However, it does receive rent-free premises, along with some IT and administrative support, which is pretty much the extent of CUNY's contribution to its running costs. The remainder must be paid from publishing profits, and from fund-raising endeavours. It was established twenty-seven years ago by Florence Howe, who only retired from the press in January 2001 — and in fact she's only semi-retired, really, because she's still the publisher of 'Women Writing Africa', an impressive series of anthologies by women who live in a broad range of African countries.

TFP publishes around 25-30 titles a year. While not as well-known as the Women's Press, in fact it was the first in the world to publish the 'lost' literature of US women, and from its inception most of the literature was by and about working-class women and men. It has since broadened its list to include writing by women from other countries, particularly Africa and the Middle East, and now publishes new works as well as re-publishing forgotten works. Most of TFP's titles are non-fiction, and it has developed an impressive memoir list, including Shirley Geok-lin Lim's American Book Award-winning *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*. Because of a lack of funds, TFP does not compete in the open market to acquire titles, relying instead on publishing works by authors who are ethically or politically committed to the

press, or that haven't been taken up by others, or that have gone out of print. Their titles are often taken up as course adoptions in educational institutions, and in fact they are very much a backlist kind of publisher rather than front or even midlist.

Most of the publishing and production work is done in-house, including editing, design and typesetting, while distribution (firm sale only) is via Consortium Book Sales and Distribution. This work is accomplished by a core staff of twelve, including the director, two senior editors, an editor who doubles as intern coordinator, two editorial assistants, three in sales and marketing, a designer/typesetter, an office assistant and, tellingly, a full-time fund-raiser, a fairly new role indicative of how lean the times are for TFP. In addition, the press relies heavily on regular interns (perhaps a dozen a year, usually college students who want to experience 'publishing') to get through many of the more administrative or clerical tasks involved in publishing.

The Feminist Press had just undergone major staff changes in the few months before my arrival, with a new director, Jean Casella, at the helm since January. Jean had spent the previous five years as editorial director of the press, under publisher/director Florence Howe, who had been in that role for the press's entire life of twenty-seven years. A number of other key staff changes took place during this transition, resulting in the two senior editors both being very new to the press, one having joined six months earlier, the other only two. Both had come from very small presses, and neither had worked with memoirs as such. This meant that the editors who *had* worked closely with the writers forming the core of TFP's cross-cultural memoir series were not available for me to talk to. It was rather a shame and echoed my Boston experience, where Deanne Urmey, their memoir 'specialist', left the press just two weeks before my arrival.

What I did at The Feminist Press

When I first arrived at the press, there was a collective sigh of relief and more than one person commented on the boxes (of books) that had arrived ahead of me: 'Your boxes kept coming [in reality there were only two], and we kept saying, "But where is *she*?" We just couldn't wait for you to get here.' Certainly I was made to feel welcome and wanted, and it was immediately clear that they had earmarked a considerable amount of work for me to do.

Their main priority at that time was to get their authors' rights into order. As at Beacon Press, and indeed at many of the other publishers I visited, e-books

were the big issue at TFP. Without the hype of the mid nineties, most publishers are quietly but determinedly developing an e-book list, sometimes on their own or, for smaller publishers, in conjunction with the burgeoning new e-book publishers such as Giant Chair and the more academic Questia. TFP had not only the contractual problem of other publishers — ambiguity in relation to electronic rights for their titles — but also the problem that, at least in the early years, their contracts were non-standard, at times even based on verbal or other gentlemen's agreements. My role was to try to ascertain what rights TFP held for their individual titles, as well as devising an electronic rights clause for their contracts, and seeking electronic rights from authors of the first fifty or so titles they were planning to produce as e-books. I was also fortunate enough to be part of a meeting thrashing out the draft contract between TFP and Giant Chair, the trade e-book publisher.

While these undertakings were very removed from my purpose in wanting the Fellowship, I decided the best thing to do was simply go with the flow in-house and to concentrate my participation in literary events on those concerned with memory, place, memoir and auto/biography — something I had been doing anyway, but in New York there are so many other wonderful authors and literary events to tempt one away from the straight and narrow. (I have to say, too, that I found my task ironic given that my unsuccessful 1996 Fellowship application had been based on a study of electronic publishing.)

Aside from this main task, I keyed in editorial changes and copy-edited a young adult biography of Winona LaDuke, a Native American activist and vice presidential candidate who stood in the last US election alongside Ralph Nader. I also attended a few press meetings but, aside from fairly regular production meetings, other meetings were pretty ad hoc, postponed or delayed due to some vital staff member's whereabouts being unknown. In my time there I did manage to be part of two general staff meetings, a sales and marketing meeting, and an inspiring sales conference rehearsal.

Quite early on but not, in retrospect, nearly early enough, I realised that in order to pursue my interest in memoirs, I would need to talk to many more people outside the press than I had originally intended. Making contact was not particularly easy because of the physical conditions under which I was working. They were rather restricting, to say the least, and quite unnecessary as I later discovered. I sat at a kind of bench pushed up against a partition in an area that was essentially a narrow corridor leading to one of the printers (which actually was about 12 inches from my face and in fairly constant use) and the marketing

manager's office. It was impossible for anyone to pass behind me (as they frequently did) unless I squeezed up so hard against the bench that my stomach was garrotted (if a stomach can be). More importantly, while my 18 square inches of desk space supported an old computer, it was not networked to anything, even a printer, let alone email, and I quickly learned via the not-so-subtle disapproval of some of my colleagues that interns aren't supposed to spend time on the phone. Fortunately I had my laptop at home and could email people at night, but it made appointments tricky to organise.

In all, I was starting to feel less and less happy. While I may have been of some use to the press, I was not coming anywhere close to achieving my aims. There were no editors there who had worked on memoirs, and no memoirs were being published at the time I was there; the press operated on completely different principles to a trade publisher, so I was not learning anything that felt helpful to my work as an editor in Australia; the understanding of the Fellowship that I had enjoyed at Beacon Press was missing at TFP, where I was largely seen as just another intern, albeit a somewhat more experienced one than usual; and I was becoming very tired after spending a full day working in stressful physical conditions and then trying to juggle all my email correspondence and event attendance at night.

A silver lining in a nasty accident caused me to change tack. One Friday night at the end of my first month at TFP I managed to cause a second-degree burn to most of my right hand while taking an overfull bowl of overheated soup out of the microwave. The only cure, according to the GP, was to take antibiotics and leave the hand uncovered as much as possible. I was able to successfully bandage the hand for short periods while I kept appointments or attended events over the next week, but the amount of lymph fluid excreted by a second-degree burn made going to the office totally impractical. Instead, I stayed home and read some of the memoirs I had been amassing in the US but hadn't had time to even look at. It was during that week that I fully realised the extent to which I was wasting my precious Fellowship time persevering with my New York placement.

After that, I severely cut back the time I spent at the press, largely read memoir submissions for my little remaining time there, and concentrated all my efforts on talking to people from other publishing houses, attending memoir-related literary events, and actually reading memoirs with a view to understanding how and why they worked, and what those insights might mean for my own editorial work in Australia. My only regret is that I didn't immediately

heed the good advice emailed to me by one prominent and wise Australian agent; she was the only person in whom I confided when I first became uneasy about how things were turning out, and had I acted on her unhesitant ‘get out now if it’s not working’, I would have been able to make even better use of my remaining month. At the very least, it would have enabled me to read more memoirs *before* talking to the editor or publisher responsible for them rather than *after* we’d met.

So, my remaining time in New York was spent reading memoirs till my eyes crossed, cramming in as many events as I could manage to attend, and visiting ditto numbers of agents as well as editors and publishers, ranging from some small but very interesting independents such as Seven Stories Press and Arcade Publishing through to the big guns at Random House, HarperCollins, Penguin Putnam and Simon & Schuster. I was also fortunate enough to score an invite, via Alun Davies, to attend a particularly illuminating Pocket Books editorial meeting. A full list of titles I acquired, people I met formally, and events I attended is given later in this report.

Also, motivated by the degree to which publishers seemed to be gearing up for e-books, I entered a competition to win a free pass to a US\$1200 two-day e-book conference held in Brooklyn in late May. I wasn’t particularly surprised when I won a pass (it was about having lots of bums on seats, I suspect), but I was surprised how useful I found it, contrary to even my own expectations, never mind those whose opinions I had sought on whether it would be worth attending. I’ve included more detail about it later in this report.

New York in a nutshell

I may have been unlucky with the exchange rate, and unwise in thinking the placement I chose would be the ideal one given my project, but otherwise New York was fabulous to me. *Now* I know what northern hemisphere spring is about, having witnessed the transformation from total leaflessness through hundreds and hundreds of daffodils and tulips bursting out on the streets, to full-blown summer glory. I was lucky enough to experience the annual Cherry Blossom festival in Brooklyn Botanic Gardens when, for almost the first time in the festival’s twenty-year history, the blossoms were actually in full bloom on the scheduled weekend.

And if my apartment was poorly equipped, requiring the purchase of fans and curtains and vacuum cleaners and other things I hadn't thought I'd need to spend money on, it was nonetheless perfect for my needs, blissful after Boston's Y, and in the most wonderful locale for my taste. In fact I couldn't have chosen better had I actually been familiar with Manhattan neighbourhoods before arriving.

The meetings I had, memoirs I read and events I attended went a very long way to compensating for my placement not working as well as I'd hoped. A highlight of these activities remains the Authors Guild seminar that featured Frank McCourt, Erica Jong, James McBride, Mary Karr and Mitch Ablom talking about what memoirists do for an encore. Despite it being a bleak and blustery Tuesday night, the auditorium was packed out, indicating just how interesting memoirs are to other people too.

As for being scary, I felt more nervous back in the inner-city streets of Sydney, which are comparatively deserted, especially at night. The only serious gulp-moment (not counting the time six cops from two squad cars thundered up and down the stairs of my very small apartment building when I was in the shower the morning of my eighth day in New York – I couldn't understand a word they were saying to each other, which was probably a good thing) happened one Sunday evening when I was deep into the tyranny of my email correspondence. I kept smelling 'bad' smoke, like I'd left a cigarette burning in an ashtray, but I looked and couldn't find it (having already set off my apartment's fire alarm twice, I didn't want a repeat). When I finally looked up (instead of down and around the apartment) I could see dense smoke billowing right outside my first-floor windows. Great! I got up and looked out to see a sofa (that someone had dumped outside the front door the night before) blazing away – along with the car parked right next to it! (I'd not long got in, so someone who came along just behind me must have set it alight.) I *was* unnerved, because if the car exploded, it would have shattered my windows and set the apartment on fire too (hey, I thought, now I know why New Yorkers are paranoid about fire – and they are). I ran around trying to think what to do, what to save, and knocked on the super's door. By the time he had roused himself, come into my apartment, looked out at the conflagration and growled 'Oh, *fuck!*' (his only comment, and the only words I ever heard him say), I could hear the fire engines. There were ten firemen in two trucks and they put it out pretty fast.

The bit I loved about this incident, because it seemed to symbolise New York's gloriously tolerant approach to life, happened as soon as the firemen switched

their hoses off. A six-year old boy detached himself from the dozens of spectators (some of whom were urging their kids to wave at the nice firemen even as the flames were roaring fifteen feet into the air), hopped onto the still-smouldering sofa springs and bounced up and down like he was on a trampoline. And the firemen just let him.

VISITS TO OTHER PUBLISHERS

As I said in the introductory section of this report, it had not been my intention to seek appointments with lots of editors and agents in the US, unless they had been recommended to me as having a particular interest or expertise in the area of life writing, or at least knowing of others who did. Because of the nature of my project, it made more sense to me to plan on spending the precious time working intensively with my host publishers, rather than meeting with others who may or may not have had something useful to share. As it turned out, I did get to meet with a lot of other people, but this was very much a plan B scenario. I think it's important for me to state this here because, rightly or wrongly, many Fellowship applicants and some of the previous recipients I spoke to feel a great deal of pressure to 'collect' names, I guess as some kind of proof that we are doing the right thing and not goofing off (what is it with us editors, anyway?), whereas in fact, depending on our individual project, our time might actually be spent more profitably doing other things, even if they are harder to 'show and tell'.

The following are all people with whom I had formal meetings of at least thirty minutes (and in a couple of memorably wonderful cases, up to an hour and a half). People's responses to me ranged from the breathtakingly generous to the outrageously rude (the list includes none of the latter, because invariably I didn't meet with them). All were interesting, and most provided really useful insights. In approaching people it always helped, of course, to know someone in common, and I was fortunate in having a couple of Australian names to drop that proved to be open sesame, in some quarters anyway.

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SEMINARS, READINGS AND OTHER EVENTS ATTENDED

It had always been my intention to participate in as many memoir-related literary events as possible. While they were scarce in Boston, I was very fortunate in that memoir-related events were almost flavour of the month in New York, at least for the first six weeks of my stay – they (and most other literary events, except for poetry) mysteriously dried up to practically nil in the second last week of May. Following are the sessions relevant to my project:

Beacon Press session at distributor Houghton Mifflin's fall season sales conference, Charles Hotel, Harvard Square, Cambridge, MA.

Elaine Brown (ex Black Panther leader), *The Condemnation of Little B*: author talk, Beacon Press, 25 Beacon Street, Boston. The author's new book is essentially concerned with how young black males are often scapegoated by the 'justice' system in the US. It was a riveting 45 minutes, of the kind that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Even the Sales & Marketing director had to wipe tears from his eyes. Essential reading.

Dawn Marie Daniels and Candace Sandy (eds), with contributor Maria Davis, *Souls of My Sisters: Black Women Break Their Silence*: forum/discussion/reading, Borders, World Trade Center, NY.

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*: discussion/signing, Barnes & Noble, Astor Place, NY. This journalist went 'undercover' to see how people get by on the minimum wage in the US (answer: they don't).

David Hadju, *Positively 4th Street*: discussion/reading, New School, 66 West 12th Street, NY. The author, whose new book is about the relationships between Joan and Mimi Baez, Bob Dylan and Richard Farina, discussed the biographer's task.

David Halberstam, 'Protest and Public Opinion in the Civil Rights and Vietnam Eras', First Amendment Center, 580 Madison Avenue, New York. Journalist and author Halberstam discussed his experience reporting (from the heart of Tennessee) on the Freedom Riders at the beginning of the US black rights movement. The event took the form of an interview/discussion (taped for a TV program) by John Siegenthaler, founder of the center and activist journalist in his own right. Congressman (D-Georgia) and civil rights activist John Lewis was also meant to be there, but his plane was delayed (no doubt it was American Eagle!)

Tom Hallock, Director, Sales and Marketing, Beacon Press: Intern seminar on sales and distribution, 25 Beacon Street, Boston.

Carol Hebold, *The Heart Too Long Suppressed: A Chronicle of Mental Illness* (Northeastern University Press): forum/reading, New York Public Library Midtown Branch, 455 Fifth Avenue, NY. Memoir of an English professor's recovery from her diagnosis as permanently deranged.

Herstories: Celebrating the Diverse Voices of Women: forum/launch/readings, WEUI, Boston (in honour of Women's History Month), Women's Educational and Industrial Union, 356 Boylston Street, Boston.

Katharine Houghton, 'Best Kept Secret': playreading of third draft script based on the author's real-life story, Primary Stages, 354 West 45th Street, NY. (In case the name seems familiar but you can't quite place it, actor/playwright Houghton played opposite Sidney Poitier in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*)

Marie Howe and Michael Kline, 'The role of memory in poetry and memoir': seminar/discussion, New York Public Library Mid-town Branch, 455 Fifth Ave, NY. Another totally inspiring session by two award-winning poets (who read the work of *other* people, not their own work, to illustrate their points). They had some fascinating things to say about memoirs and memory. In quoting William Maxwell, they agreed 'In talking about the past, we lie with every breath we draw'.

'Latino Nation: poetry and fiction across two languages': reading/forum, Instituto Cervantes, 122 East 42nd Street, NY. Panelists: Martin Espada (poet and professor of English at the University of Massachusetts), novelist Cristina Garcia (*Dreaming in Cuban*) and David Unger (poet and award-winning translator). Especially interesting was discussion of how language determines perception, and how one writes in one language a story that in real life is actually taking place in another language altogether.

Betsy Lerner, *The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice to Writers* (Riverhead, 2000): reading/author talk, Barnes & Noble, Astor Place, NY. A wonderfully inspiring session by a wonderfully inspiring editor. The book should be compulsory reading for all *editors* (Australian too) as well as authors.

'Literary Translations': forum/reading, Housing Works Used Book Café, 126 Crosby Street, NY. Panel including Burt Kimmelman (ex editor of Poetry America), Sarah Arvio (UN and literary translator), an ex Farrar Straus & Giroux editor and another poet on why Americans don't want to read anything unless it's 'American'.

Pam MacColl, Director of Publicity, Beacon Press: Intern seminar on publicity, 25 Beacon Street, Boston.

Diane McCormick, Comptroller, Beacon Press: Intern seminar on business operations, 25 Beacon Street, Boston.

Frank McCourt, James McBride, Mary Karr, Erica Jong and Mitch Ablom, 'What Do I Do for an Encore? Second Acts in American Literary Life': Authors Guild Forum, New York Society for Ethical Culture, 2 West 64th Street, NY. How lucky can a memoir-y editor get in just a short stay here to find an event starring McCourt, McBride (*The Color of Water*), Karr (*The Liars' Club*), Jong (*Fear of Flying* et al) and Ablom (whose *Tuesdays with Morrie* is heading for its 200th week on the NYT bestseller list). Apparently it took months and months to organise that lot to get together on the one night, and it was great. The only problem was, it felt like the 1.5 hours were over in a minute.

Walter Dean Myers, *Bad Boy*: lecture/discussion/reading, Brooklyn Public Library, Grand Army Plaza at Flatbush Ave, Brooklyn. Very influential YA writer talked about his recently published memoir of growing up in Harlem in the 1940s. He is especially concerned to get African-American male children reading and

writing, as well as playing basketball. He wrote his memoir to provide some kind of 'role model', giving the kids 'permission' to be smart, not just athletic.

PEN New England forum: 'Electronic Rights, the Boston Globe and You', moderated by Christopher Lydon, The Bunting Institute, Harvard University, 34 Concord Ave, Cambridge. The impetus for this forum was the effective sacking from the *Boston Globe* of journalists who would not agree to assign all their rights (including electronic) to the newspaper. Two on the panel were book reviewers, and the debate ranged into book publishing. Authors were advised to retain electronic rights at all costs.

'Sylvia Plath Revealed': forum, New York Public Library Center for the Humanities, Fifth Ave & 42nd Street, NY. A panel discussion on the publication of Plath's *Unabridged Journals* (Anchor, 2001). The panel consisted of Karen V. Kukil (the book's editor), J.D. McClatchy (poet and professor of English at Yale), novelist/poet Cynthia Ozick, another renowned poet whose name I cannot remember and Luann Walther (publisher). The general consensus among the writers (although not the publisher or editor, of course) was that the unabridged journals should never have been published, because they are the author's private writings to herself. Their publication makes Plath as a person, and her personal journal, more important than her work as a poet (and all rated her as one of the most important US writers of the last half of the twentieth century - and I also didn't realise that her biggest rival, whom she loathed, was Adrienne Rich!). They felt she herself would never have wanted them published. Many interesting questions raised about the nature of 'truth' in autobiographical writing.

Pocket Books Editorial meeting, Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, NY. I list this under events, not knowing where else to put it. The wonderful Alun Davies had scored me a seat at the meeting and although a lot of it was mundane (none of the really big books are discussed at the meeting because of fierce competition), I found it fascinating, especially as it was in such contrast to my Feminist Press experience. To hear editors dismiss sales of ten or even fifteen thousand as 'nothing' (and mean it) was incredible, both for an Aussie, and especially one based at The Feminist Press, where they will still do books they expect to sell only 3000 of, or even 2500 if they feel the book is important enough.

Ernesto Quinonez, *Bodega Dreams* (Vintage, 2000): forum/reading, Housing Works Used Books Café, 126 Crosby Street, NY. Although technically fiction, this is essentially a reality based work in which the author conveys the Latino experience in NY, having chosen fiction as a more powerful means to get exposure for that experience. Was he right! The place was packed, with many people already having read the book. Many were teachers - it is already being widely taught in NY schools.

Jane Roessner, *A Decent Place to Live: From Columbia Point to Harbor Point - A Community History* (Northeastern University Press, 2000): lecture/reading, Boston Public Library, Copley Square, Boston. As with the Lawrence Vale forum, I found this to be extremely helpful in understanding more about how place makes people in the US.

TextOneZero New York 2001: two-day e-book publishing conference, New York Marriott, 333 Adams Street, Brooklyn. I had considered paying to attend this conference, but decided against it. Then I entered a competition to win a free pass and scored one (I suspect that everyone who entered did, although only five

free passes were advertised). This conference was well worth attending and is dealt with at some length in the main body of the report.

Theatre de Complicite, *Mnemonic*, John Jay College Theatre, 899 10th Avenue, NY. I went to this play by an innovative British troupe after reading that it was about 'origins and memory', and because it has won the London Drama Critics award, and generally received glowing reviews from everyone who'd seen it. It was brilliant, though not easy to summarise in terms of applying it to memoir writing, but I just know it will help me in drawing out stories from memoir writers.

Colm Tóibín, *The Blackwater Lightship*: reading (with John Wray, *The Right Hand of Sleep*), Housing Works Used Books Café, 126 Crosby Street, NY.

Jean Trounstein, *Shakespeare Behind Bars: The Power of Drama in a Women's Prison* (St Martin's Press, 2001): forum/reading, New Words Bookstore, 186 Hampshire Street, Cambridge, MA.

Lawrence J Vale (Associate Professor, Urban Studies and Planning, MIT), 'From the Puritans to the Projects: Public Housing and Public Neighbors', Harvard Bookstore Friday Forum Series, Harvard Bookstore, 1256 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge. While this might seem an odd choice of seminar for me to attend, housing and neighbourhoods in general seem an even more strongly defining element of life experience in the US than in they are in Australia, and they very much inform the writing of memoirs there. It was, indeed, a most illuminating hour and a half.

I was disappointed to miss Diana di Prima (*My Life as a Woman*, about being part of the Beat Generation) and Mississippi memoirist Larry Brown (*Billy Ray's Farm*) because *Time Out* got the times wrong (as they not infrequently do – future BDF recipients please take note). I was especially sorry to miss Kate Millett on her memoir *Mother Millett* owing to a fairly major fire right outside, and almost in, my apartment.

BOOKS ACQUIRED

Following is a list of the books either purchased (no asterisk) or donated by publishers and agents I visited (asterisk). While the list of the former may appear long, in fact I exercised the most stringent self-restraint — and I tried to shop as much as possible at second-hand outlets, most notably the Strand on Broadway, and the wonderful Housing Works Used Books Café, on Crosby Street, in SoHo. The books are listed here because, as part of sharing my Fellowship experience, I am more than happy to lend any of these titles (once I have read them) to any other Australian editor, publisher or author.

*Marjorie Agosin, *Always from Somewhere Else: A Memoir of My Chilean Jewish Father* (Feminist Press, 1998), and *A Cross and a Star: Memoirs of a Jewish Girl in Chile* (Feminist Press, 1997)

Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (Plume, 1992)

Dorothy Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* (Dutton/Penguin, 1995)

*Joan Anderson, *A Year by the Sea: Thoughts of an Unfinished Woman* (Broadway Books)

*Gelareh Asayesh, *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America* (Beacon Press, 1999)

*Jennifer Belle, *High Maintenance* (Riverhead, 2001)

Lily Brett, *New York* (Picador, 2001)

Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (Anchor, 1992)

*Jane Brox, *Five Thousand Days Like This One: An American Family History* (Beacon Press, 1999)

*Geoffrey Canada, *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun: A Personal History of Violence in America* (Beacon Press, 1995)

*Dalton Conley, *Honky* (Vintage, 2000)

Dawn Marie Daniels & Candace Sandy (eds), *Souls of My Sisters: Black Women Break Their Silence, Tell Their Stories and Heal Their Spirit* (Kensington Publishing Corp, 2000)

Larry Dark (ed), *Literary Outtakes: False Starts, Loose Lines, Dropped Dialogue, and Other Fragments from 101 Renowned Writers* (Ballantine, 1990)

Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (Harper & Row, 1987)

Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (Vintage, 2001)

*Annie Ernaux (trans. Tanya Leslie), *Shame* (Seven Stories Press, 1998)

Fodor's Flashmaps: New York

Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, *An Accidental Autobiography* (Houghton Mifflin, 1996)

*Katharine Butler Hathaway, *The Little Locksmith: A Memoir* (Feminist Press, 1942)

*Emily Hiestand, *Angela the Upside-Down Girl and Other Domestic Travels* (Beacon Press, 1998)

Michael Holroyd, *Basil Street Blues: A Memoir* (WW Norton, 1999)

Mary Karr, *The Liars' Club* (Penguin, 1995)

Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted* (Vintage, 1993)

Michael Korda, *Another Life: A Memoir of Other People* (Dell, 2000)

Karen V. Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (Anchor, 2000)

*Jennifer Lauck, *Blackbird: A Childhood Lost and Found* (Pocket Books, 2000)

Betsy Lerner, *The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice to Writers* (Riverhead, 2000)

*Shirley Geok-Lim Lin, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* (Feminist Press, 1996)

*Michael Patrick MacDonald, *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie* (Ballantine, 1999)

*Mary MacNeill, *The Widow Down by the Brook: A Memoir of a Time Gone By* (Scribner, 1999)

*Sindiwe Magona, *Mother to Mother* (Beacon Press, 1998)

*Estella Conwill Májozo, *Come Out the Wilderness: Memoir of a Black Woman Artist* (Feminist Press, 1998)

*Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (Feminist Press, 1959)

Mark Matousek, *The Boy He Left Behind: A Man's Search for His Lost Father* (Riverhead, 2000)

Joyce Maynard, *At Home in the World* (Picador, 1998)

*Hualing Nieh, *Mulberry and Peach: Two Women of China* (Feminist Press, 1981)

*Nuala O'Faolin, *My Dream of You* (Riverhead, 2001)

Ernesto Quinonez, *Bodega Dreams* (Vintage, 2000)

*Mamphela Ramphele, *Across Boundaries: The Journey of a South African Woman Leader* (Feminist Press, 1995)

Margaret A. Salinger, *Dream Catcher: A Memoir* (Pocket Books, 2000)

Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (HarperCollins, 1943)

*Bella Spewack, *Streets: A Memoir of the Lower East Side* (Feminist Press, 1995)

*Lee Stringer (foreword by Kurt Vonnegut), *Grand Central Winter: Stories from the Street* (Seven Stories Press, 1998)

Jean Trounstein, *Shakespeare Behind Bars: The Power of Drama in a Women's Prison* (St Martins Press, 2001)

TWO OR THREE THINGS I LEARNED FOR SURE *

I always suspected that, regardless of how successful my placements might be, the nature of my project meant it was going to be tricky reporting my findings and so, of course, it is. Most of the benefits I gained from the Fellowship aren't tangible, or listable, or able to be neatly parcelled up and put down on paper in a way that makes them immediately useful to other editors. The demonstrable benefits will be most reflected in the hopefully more skilled way I work on manuscripts and with authors, both in my current freelance role and during future times in-house. I also hope to pass on these benefits in my relationships, formal as well as informal, with other editors and publishers. Nonetheless, what follows are some of the insights gained, confirmed or corrected during my time in the US.

MEMOIRS/LIFE WRITING

While I find that I cannot satisfactorily describe my experiences in terms of the initial questions that concerned me in relation to life writing/memoir (and which I list in earlier in this report), the insights I gained did coalesce around other, equally important, questions:

Is life writing still the burgeoning genre I thought it was?

There seemed to be a fairly clear divide between those who were tired – or, at the very least, cautious – of memoirs, and those who were vibrantly enthusiastic. Of the former, views ranged from 'memoirs are overrated and overpublished', and 'I wouldn't even look at a memoir, no matter what was in it, unless it was first and foremost superbly written', to a more tempered, 'Well, it all depends...' On what, they couldn't always say, apart from their own gut instinct or strong response to an individual title.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the divide between caution/aversion and enthusiasm ran pretty clearly along age lines. Without exception it was the older, more experienced editor who expressed wariness of memoirs, and the younger, newly arrived editor who waxed lyrical about them, particularly if they had just had a success. This divide was even more noticeable when I raised the issue of sequels.

* To steal and then mangle a great title from one of my greatest US discoveries: Dorothy Allison, whose *Bastard Out of Carolina* is a brilliant piece of meta fiction that probably reflects her life much more tellingly than her admitted memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*.

Inevitably it was the more senior editor who said that from their experience, sales of sequels never rewarded the effort put into them, and it would be a rare occurrence indeed for them to even entertain the idea of doing one. The younger editors who'd not long published a memoir success, on the other hand, were busy working on sequels, utterly convinced that they would be at least as successful as the original titles.

Looking at bestseller lists, though, it's clear that this genre is still of great interest to general readers. Just randomly selecting the *New York Times* list of 13 May, nine of the top twelve non-fiction titles are all in the life writing genre. In discussing how this kind of writing 'is booming as never before', the UK's *Independent on Sunday* of 8 July reported: 'Last year the British spent £21.5 million on biography and over twice this — a whopping £47.4 million — on memoirs'. Interestingly, too, the AC Nielsen report released in Australia at the end of September showed biography (in which memoirs are included) far outstripping any other area of non-fiction. Obviously the problem lies not in the genre itself, but in picking the winners.

What makes a successful memoir?

The truth is, no-one knows. Somewhere in Michael Korda's *Another Life*, his edifying and entertaining memoir of some four decades of life at Simon & Schuster, the author says (more succinctly than this, but short of re-reading the entire book, I cannot find the quote to save my life) that no-one ever knows what will make any book, regardless of genre, take off or flop, which is in turn what makes publishing so painful and pleasurable at the same time. It's always full of surprises. Certainly, no-one (especially the publisher) had predicted or could account for the stunning run of Mitch Ablom's *Tuesdays with Morrie*. I haven't checked since my return, but it was coming up to its 200th week on the *New York Times* bestseller list when I left New York, and no doubt is still there. Of course the movie with Jack Lemon probably helped its longevity, but it's almost certainly not the only explanation.

Similarly, almost everyone I spoke to was mystified by the meteoric success of *Angela's Ashes*. The two exceptions were the chief buyer for a major independent bookstore, who was adamant that it was a result solely of Frank McCourt's intensely charismatic persona, and a somewhat jaded executive editor in New York, who said it was simply a matter of overwhelming exposure — McCourt was flaunting himself everywhere you turned, so he was unavoidable. I'm not sure I buy either theory, but I tend toward the former. With only a few exceptions — most notably the McCourt/Jong/McBride/Karr/Ablom memoir seminar, and a New York public library panel on Sylvia Plath's unabridged journals — book events I attended in New

York were not especially well patronised, so there has to be something more to it than sheer force of appearance numbers.

At the packed-out memoir seminar my motivation overcame my shyness sufficiently to put a question to the panel: how important was it to the success of a memoir for the writer to be in some way charismatic, or at least a good performer in public? Gratifyingly, after commenting on what a good question it was, James McBride went on to say that he felt his experiences as a jazz performer (in his ‘other’ life) had contributed significantly to his ability to put on a show, and thus attract readers. He was fairly quickly railroaded off the topic by several of the other panelists, who claimed it wasn’t particularly important at all, but looking at them with a dispassionate eye, I had to differ: McCourt is indeed charm and wit personified; McBride, as he admits, is a seasoned performer; Jong could talk eloquently under water with marbles in her mouth; Karr, while less well-known, is a creative writing lecturer with a sharp and self-deprecating sense of humour; and Ablom is an experienced broadcast journalist in that most populist of arenas — sport. Hmm. Maybe the publicists are perfectly right when they say ‘talent’ is as important as the book itself, at least for mega-selling titles. Why some of these books do so well in Australia, despite the lack of author appearances, is another question.

To some degree the charismatic author theory even holds for the grittier kind of memoir, one with a socially progressive ‘message’. I’m thinking here especially of titles like Michael Patrick MacDonald’s *All Souls*, an account of growing up in a poor white Irish neighbourhood of Boston during the desegregation riots of the 1960s. This title did so well that Ballantine bought the paperback rights from Beacon. The author, one of the main instigators in Boston’s gun buy-back program, is indeed highly charismatic, a deeply moving and inspiring speaker despite (or perhaps because of) a limited formal education. There certainly seems to be a positive correlation between the degree to which someone is an activist leader and the success of any memoir they write. This even holds true in Australia, where Helen Barnacle’s *Don’t Let Her See Me Cry* remained in the bestseller lists for over two months without the book ever once having been reviewed. As most of these writers were not widely known before publishing their memoirs, their success probably does owe something to their ‘performance’ skills. In fact Deanne Urmy, who acquired a lot of these titles for Beacon Press over ten years and no doubt will continue to do so at Houghton Mifflin, confided to me that she never seeks her authors at literary or writers festivals; instead, they are to be found at gatherings based around social issues, whether the topic be education, race, gender, violence or whatever.

Of course, it's impossible to know how many memoirs by authors equally as charismatic as McCourt or MacDonald didn't work well at all. Certainly, no-one mentioned any. And it doesn't explain the incredible success of Dave Pelzer, who had not just one memoir (*A Child Called 'It'*, which had been on the NYT list for 158 weeks by the end of May) but two sequels (*The Lost Boy* and *A Man Named Dave*) in the top six NYT bestselling titles during my entire two months in New York. The first two were kind of self-published, I gather, while the third was taken up by Plume. Not once did I see him mentioned in the press, in any way shape or form, not once did he appear anywhere (at least in New York) and during my forays into bookstores, I never once noticed his titles. Each time I read the lists on the weekend, I made a mental note to look at the books, but then he always just disappeared from my mind because no-one ever referred to him anywhere else. I noted with some interest that his first memoir has made an appearance on a recent Australian bestseller list though.

Aside from the author's personality and performance ability, I was keen to know if particular kinds of lives translated more successfully into books than others. Again, I received almost as many different responses as people I asked, most of whom were very senior/experienced. Some of these responses, all of which can be refuted by a quick look at any *New York Times* bestseller list, included:

- People no longer want 'nice', funny-poignant, gentle memoirs about rites of passage, whether it's a child coming of age, or a woman in midlife crisis. [Why, then, has Joan Anderson's *A Year by the Sea* spent over 20 weeks on the list?]
- People no longer want to read memoirs unless they can learn something about their own lives: people have so little time for reading that they want memoirs to double up as self-help manuals. [Why, then, is it so hard for anyone to knock Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* off the number 1 position on the list?]
- People are tired of having to confront serious issues and no longer want to read life writing unless it's couched as fiction that they can choose to believe or disbelieve — but certainly not have to engage with. People are overloaded by the misery and wretchedness of so many lives as described in memoirs. As one particularly cynical editor said to me, 'We're all shocked out. Where do you go after *The Kiss*? It only worked because it was the last taboo in the US.' [Why, then, the incredible success of Dave Pelzer, described a few paragraphs earlier?]

- People only want to read memoirs if they are beautifully written, on a par with good literary fiction. [I won't name names to avoid potential offence, but one or two of the bestselling titles I read were pedestrian at best.]
- One executive editor from a major house said the only kind of memoir he'd consider publishing (but only if it was well-written to begin with) was one about race, but an equally executive editor from an equally major house who had been working on just such a book for the last two to three years says if it came to her now, she probably wouldn't take it on, even though the author can really write. In fact she avoids memoirs 'like the plague' now because it's just too hard to predict what will capture the market's imagination.

And so on. The answer is, there is no answer. Except for going with your gut, and it won't always be right, no matter how much work you put in.

As editors, how can we best work with memoirists?

Editing life writing is different to editing other kinds of books. While all authors need to be treated with sensitivity and respect – because their expertise is in question, perhaps, or the fiction is only thinly disguised autobiography – those writing memoirs are directly giving you their own lives to work with. For celebrities, the process is less intrusive because they already have a public life, and a good part of their books will be taken up with that. For non-public figures, though, the chances are that their book is being published because they have had a more painful life than most, perhaps through poverty, a history of abuse, or otherwise being in a marginalised position in relation to mainstream society. This requires extra care, and I was keen to learn more about this aspect of editing memoirs.

As it turned out, the editorial mentors I was looking forward to working with in both my placements had vacated the premises shortly before my arrival, which meant I was unable to work as deeply as I wanted on some of the issues I was interested in, particularly the ethical, voice and cultural difference issues. Nonetheless, I did gain one or two major insights into working with non-celebrity memoirists.

The work has to read well, although it isn't necessary for it to be well-written, at least in a literary sense. (Perhaps being well-written does contribute something extra to success, though – while many complained that *Angela's Ashes* was repetitive and could have done with a little judicious surgery, it is poetic and lyrical and shows all the qualities of good literary writing.) Most non-celebrity memoirists

are not writers, though, and will probably never write another book, so their work usually requires a heavy investment of editorial time. Increasingly, in New York at least, senior editors are declining to make that investment, partly because of overall budget cuts, and partly because of burned fingers – investment does not guarantee success. As Michael Korda says in *Another Life*: ‘It is possible to simultaneously overwork and underachieve – indeed, for an editor, nothing is easier. You can spend weeks – months, even – lovingly rewriting a manuscript that was never worth anything in the first place.’ The only trouble with this assessment is, very few of us can be totally confident about a book’s ‘first place’ worthiness.

And if editorial investment can’t guarantee success, it can still *make* a book. I heard no failure stories, although clearly they were behind the caution of many editors, but I did hear two stories that really brought home to me the precariousness of success and the crucial difference that editorial input can have. Joan (*A Year by the Sea*) Anderson’s highly experienced agent couldn’t interest anyone in the manuscript when it first came to her. She believed in it, though, and because she had just joined a new agency and had a lot of time on her hands, she spent a very great deal of it editing the manuscript. Although there was still some publisher reluctance to the setting, she sold it without much trouble. As at the end of May, it was spending its twentieth week on the bestseller list. Jennifer Lauck’s *Blackbird* followed a similar trajectory. A young and enthusiastic editor, newly arrived at the publishing house and with little else in her in-tray, devoted herself to it. So great was its success that they are publishing the sequel later this year. What would happen if those manuscripts hit their desks today, I asked. Nothing. They wouldn’t have been published, because there was neither the time nor the funds to make the editorial investment.

This was a common theme throughout the industry, not just among editors in the multinationals. More than one small independent admitted to me with embarrassment that the manuscripts they publish have pretty much to stand on their own, as they can no longer afford to spend money editing them. The trouble with that is, sometimes the writing is even less than pedestrian, which seems a sure-fire way for the book to fail.

From my experience in Australia I had found that editing non-celebrity memoirs often requires an additional investment that goes way beyond issues of voice, style, structure, consistency and all those other editorial staples. It comes about because of the very personal nature of memoirs and the fact that most non-celebrity memoirists have survived a childhood, maybe a life, or at least a period, of extraordinary suffering. Not only does the editor need to be sensitive to the details and context of that suffering, they also need to be aware that the author may not

always have come to terms with all the ramifications of their experience in a way that the book demands. The editor thus needs to draw them out. I think of it as ‘editor as therapist’, and I wanted to talk to other editors about it, because it’s such potentially dangerous territory.

It’s not the sort of topic you can easily get into in a thirty or even forty-five minute meeting with an editor or publisher you haven’t met before, so I was relying on my editorial colleagues in my placements to really talk through all the implications of editing this kind of material. Unfortunately, those editors were absent, so I was unable to explore this area as fully as I’d hoped. Those I met who had worked on this kind of material agreed that a pseudo counselling role is often part of the editorial process but, like me, they approached it from gut instinct level, and their general psychological knowledge. They tried to work out their own comfort zones and fit them to the author’s in order to bring out the best in the work, all the while keeping their antennae wide open for any overstepping of boundaries.

(I was lucky enough to witness an interesting variation on the private/public boundary issue when I attended a New York Library seminar on the publication of Sylvia Plath’s unabridged journals. The panel consisted of some fairly illustrious names in the literary world, and all except the book’s editor and publisher felt very strongly that the journals should never have been published. They were Plath’s private writings, meant to remain in the realm of the personal. Not only was it damaging to her as a person to reveal what she wrote in these journals, but it was damaging to her professional reputation. I had to agree and swore not to buy the book, despite having been a Plathophile for a long period of my life. I did succumb, though, when I saw a copy for half price in Broadway’s Strand bookstore.)

I have to say that the degree of commitment some editors had to their authors was astounding. One executive editor worked extremely hard over many months with one particularly chaotic memoirist who would arrive in her office late each afternoon to discuss the book, perhaps have something to eat with her, and then sleep in her office until her return next morning. Some of the material in this author’s work was so painful for him to face that he even now cannot read certain chapters he wrote. The book was a huge bestseller and, interestingly, the author now proudly considers himself a writer by profession (although he omits to grant the editor a role in that transformation).

In this genre, too, it’s not only editors who become amateur therapists — by popular demand the successful authors often find themselves having to assume this role also. Initially I found this surprising as it had not been my experience in Australia. I soon realised, though, that most of Australia’s non-celebrity memoirists are usually in some sort of advocacy or advisory role in their non-writing life or, if

not, they are reasonably happy to become a spokesperson around the issues to do with their experience. This holds true for a lot of successful memoirs in the US as well, but not for all, and many memoirists are uncomfortable with – even shocked by – public expectations of them. As I discovered at the Authors Guild memoir forum mentioned earlier, James McBride (*The Color of Water*), a jazz musician in his ideal day job, was more than a little horrified to find himself treated as ‘the Deepak Chopra of black-Jewish relations’ in the US. And for a year or so after *Tuesdays with Morrie* was published, Mitch Ablom, a sports journalist, was reluctant to leave his house because every time he did, he’d be bailed up by people wanting his advice about their dying friends or relatives. More than once he has actually been called Morrie, especially by strangers in airport queues. Even Erica Jong felt so responsible for affecting people’s lives so deeply in *Fear of Flying* that she’d find herself counselling – even accommodating in her own apartment – women who’d left their husbands as a result of reading her book.

E-BOOK PUBLISHING

Motivated by the turn my Fellowship had taken, especially in New York where my initial placement tasks were related to electronic rights, and the fact that both host publishers as well as many others I spoke to were deeply engaged in preparing their first e-book list, I considered attending a two-day e-book publishing conference, organised by British company Text One Zero, held in Brooklyn in late May. I sought a few opinions about its worth, and came to the conclusion that what I would learn probably wasn’t worth the US\$1200 price tag. I suspect a lot of other people felt the same way, because a few weeks before the event I noticed they were running a competition on their website to win a free pass. I won one. I’d guess that everyone who entered won one. There were a lot more seats than bums, despite an interesting program and an excellent line-up of speakers who, as with the audience, were fairly evenly divided between conventional book publishers, e-books publishers, and publishers who’d converted from print to e-book, with a scattering of technical boffins in between. Some insights:

- The rights area was hotly debated, with no conclusions or consensus reached by anyone. A particularly interesting panel on digital rights management consisted of, in one corner, the President and CEO of the Association of American Publishers (Pat Schroeder), and the Secretary General of the International Publishers

Association (Benoit Muller); in the other corner (or sometimes in the refereeing role) were the executive director of the Open E-book Forum (Bob Bruce), the chairman of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (Brad Templeton) and the CEO of Cherry Lane Digital and co-founder of Evolab (Jim Griffin). The former party claim that publishers are ‘investment bankers’ in copyright, and must hang on tightly to all copyright even if they don’t necessarily know why, or what they’re going to do with it; the latter group say that more money is to be made for everyone by opening up content (for example, perhaps by trying to charge subscription rates to access it) rather than by locking it up until we can absolutely predict the future. Many comparisons were made with older media – for example, television and the VCR have led to increased demand for movies, rather than stealing a piece of a finite celluloid pie. A later panel on a similar topic included Leo Dwyer, director and COO of Rosetta Books, whose case was then being heard in court, amid much heated discussion in the wider writing community. He was surprisingly quiet, apart from saying that the *Random v. Rosetta* case is about contracts, rather than copyright.

- Apparently when the University of Virginia put out-of-copyright books online last year, 2.5 million copies were downloaded in seven months. So far that kind of success hasn’t translated to trade e-books, where numbers sold are not yet even in the tens of thousands. There was general consensus (supported by surveys) about the reasons for this: readability and portability are not up to scratch, and the price is generally too high. A huge amount of technical work is being done to improve the readability issue, with radio paper, a paper-like digital technology, slated for release in 2003. As to price, I believe that part of the reason so many publishers are putting a few toes in the water is to try to get a feel on what the market will bear. Certainly those expecting readers to pay the same price as, or perhaps only ten per cent less than, the printed book are not getting a good response from readers. Interestingly, those offering titles for free or very cheaply are saying that it actually encourages sales of the printed book – readers are using the free or cheap version as a taster.
- While one or two highly experienced publishers I asked were confident that editors needn’t be concerned about e-books as they are largely a marketing and distribution issue, the conference went a good way to assuring me that my gut feeling is right – in the longer term, anyway, they are very much an editorial issue. Most speakers agreed with Brad Templeton’s assertion that 95% of the value is in the content, not the format the content is packaged in. However, the format does

inform the content and how it is structured, and the new medium is very different to the printed book. We have to remember here that a hand-held device is only one part of the e-book story — the web, whatever the delivery mechanism, will have a huge part to play in our future reading. It was interesting to hear Glenn Haumann, COO of Bibliobytes, describe the web as an ‘editor’s medium’; according to him, no-one knows how to write for serialisation, which he perceived as a major content form in the future. Repurposing it still seen as a key revenue source for publishers in the short term, and repurposing involves editors as much as it does technicians and distributors. Even the how-to books, which everyone agrees will be the first successful genre of e-books, require substantial editorial input to successfully convert the content to its new format.

THE MARKET FOR AUSTRALIAN BOOKS

Everyone agrees that Americans are insular. Even so, I was a little surprised to be asked which hemisphere Australia is in by the editor responsible for acquiring anthropology titles for one prestigious house. And I didn’t often catch the early evening news in New York, but on the three or four occasions I did manage to watch an entire broadcast, I was bemused by the fact that not one single item was about anywhere or anyone or anything non-American — it was as though the entire rest of the world had disappeared once I crossed the US border. (I was not surprised to read in the *Sydney Morning Herald* recently that over the past ten to twenty years, broadcast news coverage of other countries had shrunk from about 45% to less than 6% of items, a figure that may well reverse following the September disaster.)

Still, given its superpower status, the size of the population and the number of new titles published each year (close to 50,000 according to one source), in some ways it makes sense that US readers would by and large be interested only in books about themselves. Following are a few insights garnered during my visit:

- In regards to memoirs and life writing, all editors and publishers I spoke to said that if it didn’t have a strong American connection, US readers wouldn’t buy it. In fact the publishing director of one house that does a lot of memoirs actually went so far as to say that for a book to even get a look-in, you had to be able to put ‘hyphen American’ in the subtitle (as in ‘An Australian or Chinese or African or Whatever “hyphen” American Story’). In practice this was well-illustrated by my attempts to interest people in Roberta Sykes’ trilogy, published here by Allen &

Unwin. What interested them was the controversy about whether Sykes' father was Aboriginal or African-American. If it proved to be the latter, they'd definitely be interested, but not otherwise. They were very polite about it – even slightly embarrassed in one or two cases – but very definite.

- The print run needed for a title to be considered viable, especially in the larger houses, goes some way to explaining this. A big eye-opener for me as an Aussie editor was the Pocket Books editorial meeting I was fortunate enough to be invited to. With twenty-one editorial staff and one rights manager in attendance, I expected things to move along at a brisk pace but even so was a little gob-smacked when it took less than a minute for a second title by one of their authors to be rejected because his first title 'did nothing'. That 'nothing' was 10,000 copies, and the 15,000 copies his next book was expected to sell were considered not worth the bother. I don't even know what the book was about because the contents weren't discussed.
- Many publishers, especially the larger ones, were not particularly interested in Australia even as a market. According to Tom Hallock, the sales and marketing manager at Beacon Press, they do as much business with *one* independent bookstore in Boston (admittedly it's one of the top independent bookstores in the country) as they do in the whole of Australia. All the small independent publishers seemed to want to know was which distributor to use in Australia because they weren't happy with their current distributors.
- The one shinningly positive response I got to my Australian books came from the people at the Housing Works Used Book Café in Crosby Street, SoHo. It's a great bookstore with a very impressive author events program – for my first five or six weeks in New York, they had something really interesting on every second day of the week. I decided to donate to them the complimentary books that Australian publishers had given me to take over, but that I hadn't managed to find an appropriate home for. Almost before I could open my mouth, they greeted my stack with a very enthusiastic, 'Oh, wow! Books from the Asia-Pacific. We hardly ever get anything from there – this is wonderful!' So maybe the books I lugged over and around will do some good after all, even though it may be in more subtle ways than I'd hoped.

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

After sixteen years in trade publishing, I was a little tired, a little jaded. So often it is such a struggle just to keep one's head above water, there's not much opportunity to truly develop one's strength and style, let alone to explore different strokes. The generosity and commitment of Australian publishers and the Australia Council have enabled me, and past and future Fellowship recipients, to do precisely that. The experience this 'sabbatical' provided was extremely valuable and will remain with me always. I can't express it no better than to quote Betsy Lerner when she says of her mentor and the advice she was given:

I like to think of it and to remember Ruth when cynicism in the business runs high, when people seem not to remember what they are trying to do or why they chose this low-paying, thankless field. I like to think of it every time a book I have sunk my heart and soul into vanishes without a trace, or when a beloved author gets a hideous review in a paper of record...But I especially like to think of Ruth every time a new college graduate finds her way into my office for an informational interview and tells me with complete sincerity, when I ask her why she wants to become an editor, that she loves books. I want to tell her to run for the hills, as the senior agent I once worked for had tried to warn me. I want to tell her that the surest way to kill that love is to work in a publishing house, just as going to writing school will surely kill the aspirations of any number of writers.

Yet, somehow, no matter how beleaguered the world of editing has become, no matter how short a book's shelf life in today's market (...somewhere between the milk and the yogurt), no matter how uncertain the future of any publishing career today, none of us can ever forget the feeling of first discovering the majesty of reading...Working as a book editor brings with it the possibility of re-creating that feeling through the discovery and nurturing of authors. The joy of working on a manuscript, holding a finished book that one has helped to shape, is not unlike the midwife's joy for those who believe that communication through the written word is miraculous.

(The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice to Writers, Riverhead, 2000, pp.188-9)

I think of my experience in Boston and New York in the same way Lerner views Ruth and her advice. Thank you so much, Fellowship sponsors, for helping me rediscover that purpose and joy. I'm sure I will put it to good use.

RESOURCES FOR FUTURE FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENTS

I found the following websites to be useful in researching US publishing and finding out about events and activities. While in New York I also found the two most useful sources of print information were *Time Out* - although it is prone to getting times and occasionally dates wrong - and the weekend *New York Times*.

Books/publishers in the market

Amazon: amazon.com

Ingrams ipage: ipage.ingrambook.com (or via www.ingrambookgroup.com)

Interlink: www.interlinkbooks.com

Literary Marketplace: www.literarymarketplace.com

Litline: www.litline.org

Publishing and event information

Bookwire: www.bookwire.com

Publishers Lunch: www.publisherslunch.com

Publishers Weekly: www.publishersweekly.com

Other

Author's Guild: www.authorsguild.org

Literary Arts Web Ring: www.lit-arts.com/WebRing/RingIndex.html

National Writers Union: www.nwu.org

Poet's House (runs some great non-poetry literary events too): www.poetshouse.org

Poets and Writers (ditto re events): www.pw.org

Shaw Guides (guide to writers conferences and festivals): www.shawguides.com

FINANCIAL REPORT

Despite the generosity of the Australia Council and some publishers (for which I thank them) in contributing an additional \$2420 to the original \$28,000 funds provided, the exchange rate (which averaged 50 cents to US\$1) created a shortfall of over \$3000 despite extremely frugal living, and despite my not counting certain costs incurred at home during this time. In fact there are direct costs that I have not included here (such as a telephone bill component that came in after I'd prepared the figures, and other bits and pieces I neglected to note) because they simply require too much painful and pointless effort to re-do.

Notes

1. **GST:** this issue caused me considerable grief as the first Fellowship recipient post GST. Less than three weeks before my departure, while I was still struggling to get the funds released from the APA, it was suddenly decided that at some time in the future GST might be deemed payable on the Fellowship. While the APA was happy to provide the funds, the rest was my responsibility, including any income tax implications. Two issues need urgently to be clarified before the next Fellowship: whether the GST is payable and, if so, who organises it. GST is not payable on Australia Council grants and, according to advice I received from the Council, the reason for this is that grant applicants don't know whether they are going to be given what they're asking for, if anything. Clearly, the same applies to BDF applicants. Secondly, because I *happened* to be a freelancer and *happened* to be registered for the GST, responsibility for dealing with it was deemed to be mine. Had I worked in-house, I was given to understand that the relevant publisher would probably have taken on responsibility for it. This seems extremely unfair on freelancers, many of whom are *not* registered for the GST in any case. Because it was so distressing, I also wish to comment here on the attitude of the APA's accountants, who dealt with me over the release of funds. They had absolutely no idea what the Fellowship was about and persisted in treating me like a shifty sub-contractor doing some dubious work for the APA.
2. **Receipts** are available for all major and most other expenses. Many of the places at which I bought food, especially my corner store in Boston but also in New York, were not able to provide receipts, and at other times (eg while buying a \$3 sandwich) I forgot to ask for one. However, I did keep a notebook of these costs.

- 3. Travel:** costs in the 'Other' category are almost exclusively subway passes. I used public transport even late at night to avoid the cost of taxis. I think I caught only four or five taxis during my entire trip.
- 4. Accommodation:** while I understand that living costs generally have not increased hugely in the last few years, the cost of accommodation has. Short-term rental prices in Boston are almost as hefty as the outrageous prices in New York. AUD11,790 got me one month in a Boston YWCA cell and two months in a tiny walk-up studio-style apartment (doorpersonless, of course) in New York.
- 5. Utilities:** in New York these costs were fixed as part of the accommodation package. In Boston I had to spend extra getting a phone connected in my room, partly to avoid the truly awful public phones in the corridors, and also to avoid the US\$12 per hour (AUD24) that it would have cost to use the public Internet machine. As email was my main form of communication and I spent a great deal of time online, it was much cheaper to get my own phone. Luckily AOL had a great recruitment deal at the time of my arrival, so ISP costs were quite low, at least for the first two months. I also tried to get my nearest, dearest and others to relieve me of some of the costs by phoning me rather than me phoning them, and they accepted it with grace — thank you.
- 6. Materials and equipment:** this category created a bigger hole than I expected. In Boston items ranged from the telephone handset mentioned above to a power board (the YWCA was so old that its electrical outlets weren't earthed, creating great potential hazard in using my laptop) and a cheap clock radio. In New York, where the apartment was badly equipped for longer stays, they included a vacuum cleaner (the alternative, offered by the agent, was a house cleaner at AUD100 per visit), numerous bits of cooking equipment, a large fan to cope with the heat (it was 40 degrees Celsius on 4 May, and must have been at least 55 degrees inside the apartment, which faced the sun unprotected). By far the most amusing item was curtains to screen the large window at the foot of the bed. Like the other windows in the apartment, it was covered only in gauzy, see-through stuff, and less than twelve inches away was an identical window belonging to an apartment in the building next door. When I expressed concern to the agent, he assured me that no-one could see in because no-one lived in the neighbouring apartment. Really? About 10pm on my first night I was drawn to the bedroom area by lots of laughing and shouting and scraping of woks. Peering through the bedroom window I saw a kitchen full of Chinese people

cooking up a storm. It was all so close I could have reached through our joint windows and helped myself – it smelled so delicious, I really wanted to. Instead I went out and bought some curtains. In fact the people, whoever they were, were not there consistently, nor were they always the same people...

- 7. Miscellaneous:** I have included bank fees here as they were an outrageous proportion of costs. No matter which option I used – credit card or ATM withdrawal – they ranged between \$4 and \$7.50 per transaction.

- 8. Home expenses:** Here I have included only fixed charges. Running expenses for the housesitter (eg gas, electricity, cable TV rental, telephone calls etc) plus food for two cats have not been included.

FUNDS
ACQUITTAL

FUNDS RECEIVED

Original funds	28000
Additional contribution (APA)	3900
Additional contribution (APA)	550
Additional contribution (APA)	350
Additional contribution (Australia Council)	<u>1000</u>
Total received	33800
Less GST deemed payable by the APA	<u>3380</u>

TOTAL FUNDS AVAILABLE

30420

EXPENSES IN US

Travel	US airfare	1980	
	Airfare JFK to Boston	420	
	Train Boston to NY	122	
	Insurance	554	
	Other (subway, taxis)	<u>641</u>	3717
Accommodation			
	Boston (YWCA)	1790	
	New York	<u>10000</u>	11790
Utilities	(Power, phone, Internet)		1033
Postage			729
Materials and equipment			2158
Reference materials			1374
Living expenses	(Food, pharmacy, laundry)		7755
Miscellaneous	(Gifts, entertainment, bank fees)		<u>696</u>

Total US expenses

29252

HOME EXPENSES

(Mortgage, insurance, telephone rental,
council, water, Internet etc fixed charges)

4587

**TOTAL
COSTS**

33839

TOTAL DEFICIT

-3149