"A sacred duty": How Australian micro- and small presses publish and promote silenced and under-represented writers – and what their authors think about the process

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Part 1: The strategies of small presses and their authors' feedback on those strategies

Introduction

Micro- and small-press publishing sits at the intersection of literature, art and politics. It is acclaimed for championing unheard voices, acting as "research and development" for new writers, styles and writing communities, and serving as a vital component in a very complex publishing ecosystem.

Australia's book industry is very slowly coming to the realisation that it has a responsibility to publish works and authors who represent the full range of Australian lives, who express different experiences, backgrounds and knowledges. What we shouldn't forget is that micro- and small presses (MSPs) have long been making this a reality. Perhaps instead of the industry attempting to reinvent the wheel in publishing "diversity", it could learn from the decades-long experience of successful small presses who have routinely elevated the creations of neglected, silenced and unheard voices.

This was the purpose behind my master's research, which I completed in 2020. I wanted to learn from experienced small presses and share their knowledge and practices with the wider Australian publishing industry. I completed my thesis on the strategies that small-press publishers use to raise and amplify the voices of traditionally excluded authors. My research also aimed to learn what authors published by small presses thought of their publishers' performance, and to discover their suggestions for the industry. Writers of difference from many backgrounds have frequently (and fairly) lambasted their systematic and systemic exclusion from publishing, so I wanted to learn the details of their ideas around specific publishing practices – and thus offer something of a roadmap to an industry which says it is now listening to "diverse" authors. (I use "writers of difference", or "WOD/s", for creators, rather than "diverse authors", following the work of Merlinda Bobis (2017).)

The two publishing houses I worked with in my project were Spinifex Press and Wild Dingo Press (WDP), which both have long histories of publishing and publicising under-represented writers. Spinifex has just celebrated 30 years in business and Wild Dingo has been operating for over a decade. I conduced nine interviews with publishers and staff of both presses and with two writers published by each press. Authors' contributions were provided anonymously. The research was framed by appropriate ethics approvals from the University of Queensland.

In this collaboration with the Small Press Network, I am beyond delighted to share the results of my research in the knowledge that it provides a range of potential practices for the Australian publishing industry. It should be especially useful for publishers and presses who strive to increase the range, variety and volume of writers whose voices we have missed out on for too long.

This instalment of the SPN publication, the first of four, collates the publishing strategies used by publishers and their authors responses to them. Points **in bold** diverge from standard publishing procedures (Smart, 2012; Thompson, 2012). Where the presses differed in their strategies, their methods are attributed to "Spinifex" or "WDP" respectively. The ✔️ (positive) and **X** (negative) show authors' feedback on the presses' strategies and performance.

All participants needed to have the concept of "publishing strategies" explained or contextualised to some degree. The publishers' normal practices routinely used strategies that support unheard voices, so they had difficulty separating their "business as usual" from activities that specifically favoured excluded creators. The authors, fairly enough, had little awareness of their presses' strategies stage-by-stage, save those most directly affecting them: acquisition, editorial, design and promotion.

Publishers' strategies for different publishing stages, and authors' responses to their strategies and performance

Publishing stage	Publishers' strategies	Authors' responses
Staffing	**-Reflect the press' principles (e.g. all women or feminists on staff)** **-Hire a range of ages, generations, languages and cultures** **-Find suitable roles for valuable non-mainstream staff** **-Hire staff who uphold and love the press' principles** **-Prioritise an ethical work environment**	✔Artists, designers, editors and publishers

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Publishing stage	Publishers' strategies	Authors' responses
Manuscript acquisition	**-Only accept manuscripts that inspire passion in publishers and staff** -Only publish titles aligned with the press' publishing philosophy **-Prioritise writers who specifically choose press and its principles** *(Spinifex)* -Select authors for their unusual or valuable experience, analysis or topic **-Do not select WODs based on a tokenistic or hot-topic mentality** -Know which topics or authors the press won't publish (e.g. liberal feminist, pro–environmental vandalism) -Capitalise on anthologies to bring a wide range of difference voices to complex issues **-Reject a manuscript if 1 staff member vetoes** *(Spinifex)* -Commission to ensure voices are heard *(WDP)* **-Commission writers to tell stories for low literacy or low-English storytellers** *(WDP)* **-Do not commission (financial risk)** *(Spinifex)* **-Be selective with agents (few understand the realities of micro- and small presses)** *(Spinifex)* **-Be open to unsolicited manuscripts (many unheard or non-English-speaking-background storytellers won't have agents)** *(WDP)* -Assess a manuscript's suitability based on press' market/s (Australia/international) -Trust in the press' backlist and reputation to attract suitable authors (word of mouth) -Acquire or commission translations **-Publish bilingual or monolingual texts in other languages** -Attend conferences, events and literary happenings to seek new voices -Be realistic about the total books planned -Stay open to reassessing acquisition rules	✅Open to or excited by difference ✅Genuine interest in literature ✅Understand good writing ✅Take risks ❌Low advances

Publishing stage	Publishers' strategies	Authors' responses
Editorial	-Take author's work absolutely seriously -Expect the best of the work and the author (regardless of their name, identity, status or fame) -Ensure respectful and honest editor–author relationships -Be interventionist in rewriting and editing to achieve the best text (it shows respect to authors) **-Aim to publish only highest-quality work** **-Use paid or community interpreters with low-level English users, authors or storytellers** **-Allow necessary time to finalise best-quality manuscript (don't be bound by scheduling)** -Agree with author about italics, roman and spelling on non-English terms (rather than the dictionary or style manual) -Agree with author about use of endnotes, footnotes, in-text explanations or glossary -Include translated and/or multimedia language content **-Seek community readers, sensitivity readers or academic experts to review manuscripts** *(WDP)* **-Sensitivity readers not needed; already the editor's job** *(Spinifex)* **-Make no changes without author's approval** **-Let author keep final editorial responsibility: "it's their book"** -Keep house style flexible enough to accommodate different authors' work -Be willing to rupture standard genre classifications and styles -Include full names in bibliographies to identify writers e.g. as women *(Spinifex)* **-Keep titles promoted and in print as long as the press holds rights**	✔✔Work maintained its integrity: "Oh, absolutely" ✔Tough, patient and thorough structural and copy-editing ✔Team reads and discusses book *(Spinifex)* ✔Detailed attention to indexes and bibliography ✔Checked non-English text ✔Kept original title ✔High levels of collaboration ✔Able to explain and maintain their own creative choices

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Publishing stage	Publishers' strategies	Authors' responses
Design	**-Always seek author input about cover design and image** **-Only publish the cover or image the author wants and approves** **-Try to choose designers culturally aligned with manuscript** -Ask cover designer to read manuscript *(WDP)* -Ask cover designer to prepare title page, half-title page, TOC and fonts -Match symbols and design features to title's culture or group (e.g. clapstick dinkus in an Indigenous title) **-Choose or purchase images that align with the press' principles or from subject's community (e.g. disabled, Indigenous or women creators)**	✔✔Consultative design process, especially covers ✔Use authors' ideas and/or artwork ✔Many cover choices
Production	-Use standard fonts and templated layouts for set genres, ages and series -Set clear guidelines for author changes to final pages	✔✔Finished product: "their books look good" ✔Press provides typeset files to foreign presses
Printing	-Maintain relationship with 1 printer rather than pushing printers to compete on price *(Spinifex)* **-Choose printers using FSC-certified paper** -Balance traditional or POD printing contracts with market and sales requirements -Consult with team (and co-investment author) about print runs -Use small or POD print runs to test the market	✔Consulted on print runs (co-funding model, *WDP)*

Publishing stage	Publishers' strategies	Authors' responses
Marketing/ publicity[1]	-Consult authors about publishing and marketing suggestions and contacts (e.g. questionnaire) **-Consult with authors before applying the press' existing or default promotion methods** **-Suggest but don't enforce authors' web presence** -Traditional media: postcards, pamphlets, magazines, newspapers, journals and newsletters -Online: website, e-lists, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube -Book-trade journals, groups and catalogues (e.g. Leading Edge, Australian Publishers Association, Small Press Network, *Books+Publishing* and International Alliance of Independent Publishers) -Market to schools through Children's Books Council of Australia, teachers' groups, libraries and teaching websites (for author events/sales) -Hire publicist for all or specific books (co-hire with co-investment) -Aim for author exposure in media, reviews, conferences and festivals **-Pay to enter authors in relevant awards** **-Be sensitive to authors' preferences or style in planning promo and events—train them or ease them in** -Be creative in developing promo to capitalise on authors' traits and skills (e.g. circus, acting) -Marketing and events with authors' and publishers' identified communities, networks, researchers and allies (e.g. feminist conferences/PEN Melbourne) -Specialist newsletters for booksellers, libraries and schools	✓✓Always publicising all titles ✓"They do their utmost" ✓Hiring publicist ✓Collaborative event planning ✓Authors write and edit promotional text ✗Insufficient or poor promotion, "really, really not optimal" ✗Limited publicity means few reviews and sales -Contribute to promotion, "be creative, get yourself out there" -Prefer hiring external publicist *(WDP)*

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[1] Marketing is the holistic strategy of promoting books to vendors, distributors, libraries and consumers. Publicity is the marketing stage aimed at selling books to consumers (Baverstock & Bowen, 2019).

Publishing stage	Publishers' strategies	Authors' responses
Distribution/ sales	-Own ANZ distribution *(Spinifex)* -Contract distribution in key or all territories *(WDP)* -Support distributors in marketing -Online shop -Sell in-person at launches, events and conferences -Encourage authors (especially co-investors) to organise events and sales -Offer high discounts to bookshops	-Generally adequate **X**Limited reach (e.g. bookshops)
Legals/ financials	-Solid, clear, fair standard contract -Contract revised by lawyer **-Take extra care to communicate legal and financial info accurately to non-English-speaking background authors** **-Be open to authors' modifications** **-Offer co-investment contract for important but less-commercial titles** **-Pay royalties regularly and on time** -Defamation insurance	✓Clear, issue-free contracts ✓Regular reports and royalties ✓Co-publishing recommended for WODs **X**Co-publishing not appropriate for all authors
Foreign rights/ translations/ co-editions	-Attend international book fairs (e.g. Frankfurt) -Participate in book fairs virtually or through APA print and online promo -Leverage international contacts and networks -Hire export managers or foreign language agents **-Co-publish translated texts (shares costs)** **-Donate or sell rights cheaply to Global South publishers (ensures title available in key markets)**	✓Often sell rights to other MSPs (good but limits author income) ✓Frankfurt attendance and rights sales (e.g. 1 title, 16 languages) ✓Seeking film rights sales ✓Half have sold international rights **X**Signing away all language, territory or format rights, or all future titles
Metadata	-Complete all fields (including diversity information related to authors and content) -Update promptly as needed -Ensure feeds come from correct source for each market and territory	(Authors had little/no knowledge)

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Publishing stage	Publishers' strategies	Authors' responses
Overall	**-Prioritise respectful long-term relationships: staff, contractors, authors, distributors/etc** -Seek grants and funding in Australia or overseas for expensive or significant titles -Be alert to extra sensitivities with WODs -Be transparent with authors about publishing processes and timelines	✅Opportunity, allowing creative growth, "midwifing my firstborn", "shed light on issues of concern" ✅✅Care, commitment ✅Strong political or aesthetic alignment: "they just seemed to be the right fit" ✅Continual consultation, transparent communication ✅Recommend publishing with press (if co-publishing not obligatory) ✅Book/promotion represented authors' vision

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