



International
Women's Day

PEN Melbourne acknowledges that Indigenous Australians are the first people of this land. We pay our respect to the traditional owners, their elders past and present, their families and descendants. We acknowledge the history of dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island land, culture and language. We also acknowledge the history of resistance and creation of community-controlled organisations and services to address these past and current injustices and to retain and strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. We are proud that this land has been the place of one of the world's oldest living cultures and people.

PEN Melbourne supports the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first peoples of Australia, the removal of provisions from our constitution that authorise racism, and the acknowledgement of the unique place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and culture in our national story.

Free and Fair Speech

On Wednesday 19 March, the Wheeler Centre played host to a conversation between publisher, poet and aerialist Susan Hawthorne, and writer Cynthia Troup, committee member of PEN Melbourne. In honour of International Women's Day, and under the auspices of the PEN International Women Writers Committee (IWWC), Susan shared her views on 'Fair Trade and Fair Speech: Feminist Publishing in the 21st Century'. She gave a potted history of feminist publishing and bookselling, spoke about her writing practice, and explained the importance of 'bibliodiversity' and 'organic publishing' in times of mega-publishing corporations (think of the recent merger between giants Penguin and Random House).

Susan Hawthorne is a political activist and author of ten books. Co-founder and publisher of Melbourne's Spinifex Press—Australia's longest-running feminist publishing house—Susan has written extensively on philosophy, feminism and literature. Among her most recent accolades are the shortlisting of her poetry collection *Cow* in the Kenneth Slessor Poetry Prize in the 2012 NSW Premier's Literary Awards, and her time as Literature Resident at the BR Whiting Studio in Rome in 2013. She is also the English-language editor of the International Alliance of Independent Publishers.

Susan was one of the key organisers of the Sixth International Feminist Book Fair (IFBF), held in the Royal Exhibition Building in 1994. Around 200 writers and 23,000 members of the public attended the event (in a 'brutal Melbourne winter wind' according to the press of the day), which was held over five days and focused on Indigenous, Asian and Pacific Writing and Publishing. Women attended from all over the world, including indigenous Australia, Saudi Arabia and Trinidad and Tobago. Susan reported that the talk on radical feminism was so well attended that she 'had one foot out the door and [her] head inside' to be able to listen in.

Unfortunately, this splendid tribute to women's publishing—held 20 years ago in July—was the sixth and last IFBF. Susan recounted how the 1970s to the early 1990s were exciting times for feminist word-lovers, with a boom in feminist presses in the US, UK and Australia (such as Sybylla), five international book fairs run in London, Oslo, Montreal, Barcelona and Amsterdam respectively between 1984 and 1992, and Feminist Book Fortnights celebrated Australia-wide in 1989 and 1991. That year, around 200 people attended events in Broome and some 15,000 catalogues were published to promote feminist writers' work. Today, there are only four women's presses in Australia (Spinifex, OtherWise, DykeBooks and Long Breast Press), and fewer than ten feminist bookshops and five feminist presses in the United States, down from hundreds and dozens respectively in the early 1990s. The 1993 US Book Expo hosted an entire corridor of lesbian, feminist and gay publishers (alas, no longer), and today feminist thought is utterly underrepresented at writers' festivals in Australia.

Susan noted that the IFBF's focus on migrant, indigenous and experimental women's writing can now only be dreamed of, and how only once in its 23-year history has Spinifex Press or a Spinifex writer been invited to the single, obligatory panel on 'feminism and its relevance' which regularly appears in Australian writers' festivals.

Susan cited the perpetual lack of ongoing infrastructure for feminist organisations and publishing as one of the key reasons for feminist undertakings ‘disappearing’ from history (see also her article on the Australian Women Writers Challenge site, entitled ‘The forgotten women’s writing festivals’) and pointed out how crucial feminist publishers have been as archivists of women’s histories. She also pointed out how the rise of gender studies has killed women’s studies as an academic discipline, with post-modernist theorists such as Jacques Derrida, and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan occupying the spaces formerly devoted to women’s history and politics in the university sphere.

So why have we seen such a trajectory for feminist publishing? Susan pinpointed the mid-1990s as the moment of change, with the rise of two globalised bookselling giants: Borders in 1993 and Amazon.com in 1995. In choosing where to open their superstores, Borders co-located their branches with the best independent bookshops—in many cases, feminist ones. For one boom year, publishers doubled their market across the indie booksellers and the new megachain, but then Borders’ impacts began to be felt and independent booksellers started closing their doors. Small publishers also suffered from the megastores’ practices of buying up big on stock, only to return it all in a few months’ time, leading to increased cost in warehousing and unnecessary print runs. The second influence, Amazon.com, had a dual impact. Firstly, it heralded the boom in online book- (and everything-else!) buying, which directly affected small local retailers and feminist bookstores. And secondly, its name was already that of the prestigious Amazon feminist bookshop in Sacramento, California. While the bookstore eventually won its copyright case and kept the right to use the contested name, business took a serious downturn and the store closed, causing other feminist booksellers to lose heart.

And what is happening in feminist publishing today? Susan described how her role with the International Alliance of Independent Publishers, plus Spinifex’s coordination of a network of women’s publishing in the Asia-Pacific region, have given her access to ‘interesting things happening in out-of-the-way places’. She mentioned a press in Morocco, bilingual publishers in India producing works in English and Hindu/Urdu/Tamil (depending on their location), and a publisher and bookshop in Bangladesh which invites women in through its adjoining sari shop and organic restaurant. The diversity of these offerings, and their ability to produce materials that are relevant to their local situation, highlights the importance of ‘organic publishing’ and ‘bibliodiversity’.

‘Organic publishing’ is a concept of Susan’s that is akin to organic farming: an act best done on a small scale, not as grandiose as an agribusiness or global publishing firm. Organic publishing means a lively, vibrant community of small publishers who produce works which are important to their local readerships and tastes. They are able to complete small print runs—which represent environmental savings in terms of paper and fuel—and allows fewer returns from bookstores and thus less waste. A print-run of 500 copies can be eminently successful if profit is not the be-all and end-all of the publishing enterprise. Many small and diverse publishers who are editorially led will ensure that novelty and creativity is encouraged in publishing circles.

The opposite of this type of publishing is sales-led publishing, where the marketing department guides editorial choices in order to duplicate last year’s bestseller. This is the speciality of corporate publishing houses like Penguin, Random House, Mondadori (in Italy), etc., with their twin weapons of globalisation and homogeneity, and bodes ill for ‘bibliodiversity’ and the richness of books available in the world.

Tied in with these ideas are notions of ‘free speech’ and ‘fair speech’. The much-bruited idea of free speech, protected by the US constitution but not by Australian law, has been championed by representatives of the pornography industry, often acting as the Free Speech Coalition, founded in 1991 and working to ensure the industry’s right to publish and produce. The opposite of free speech—which has traditionally only been free for ‘able-bodied white men’—is fair speech, an idea developed by Spinifex and OtherWise author Betty McLellan in her book *Unspeakable: A Feminist Ethic of Speech* (2010). Fair speech recognises the significant handicaps to ensuring equality of outcomes, and works to decentralise power, foster justice and fair treatment, work for social justice by focusing on engagement and the common good, and prioritise life over profit.

A key philosophy which permits fair speech is feminism, and Susan highlighted the level of censorship and belittlement of feminist publishing, activism and ideas in the mainstream. In addition to the silent indifference towards feminist thought in public spheres, Susan mentioned her and Spinifex’s experiences of censorship in Australia: see her article, ‘To Whinge or not to Whinge’ (referenced below), which *The Age* chose not to publish because the editor didn’t want her to ‘cop all that flak’, when Susan herself was not fearful of ‘flak’. Feminism, although it is distorted and simplified in the press, is still centred on the twin issues that Susan expressed as: 1) women are oppressed and 2) we have to do something about it, and it can’t be theoretical or armchair activism. As Cynthia Troup observed, the fear of feminism is quite possibly a fear of ‘the precision of observation from women with purpose and clarity’.

It is also crucial to recognise that feminist and alternative writers, publishers and booksellers have invariably been at the cutting edge of thought and politics.. Susan credits Spinifex with being at least 20 years ahead of mainstream thinking, and reported turning to her partner Renate Klein while reading the paper recently to say, ‘Didn’t we publish a book on that 15 years ago?’ Likewise, small publishers are often revolutionary in their practices, and push the bounds of risky publishing: small digital publishing distributor Bookish was recently sold to US company Overdrive on the strength of its ‘freshness and riskiness’. Supporting small presses and organic publishing works in the long haul to sustain bibliodiversity.

Spinifex Press, which Susan co-founded with Renate Klein, has spent its 23 years operating at the forefront of feminist activism and publishing, choosing to bring out works which combine the commercial with the political. (Susan reckons that the political normally wins.) She is proud that Spinifex operates as a for-profit company, that it puts considerable effort into covers, marketing and editing, and that it is well known and well regarded in the United States and abroad.



Susan Hawthorne.
Photo: www.spinifexpress.com.au

In 1995, Spinifex was the third Australian publisher to complete its digital catalogue, and it was the first Australian publisher to begin producing e-books in 2006. Spinifex, with its determinedly internationalist bent, has had great success with this sector: in the US market, around 20–30% of its sales are in e-books. (The US feminist book market alone is larger than the entire Australian book market.) Although the e-book market is designed for multinationals with US bank accounts and legal training, careful participation is working for Spinifex and can also do so for other small and self-publishers. Spinifex's digital focus has translated well to the era of social media and Facebook, which allow the press to be in contact with thousands of readers on a daily or weekly basis, and helps it keep up to date with the daily lives of women from all parts of the globe. The press's current catalogue includes some 250 titles, and Susan emphasised that it continues to produce 'p-books'—printed books—to ensure Spinifex's titles are here for posterity.

Spinifex Press always receives more manuscripts than it can publish, and Susan was quick to highlight the importance of having more than one feminist press in operation, to express the many different feminist voices that deserve to be heard. Among Spinifex's titles are two autobiographical works (in translation) by prolific Egyptian writer and activist Nawal El Saadawi, whose case was the first one championed by the newly formed PEN International Women Writers Committee in 1991 (also the year of Spinifex's founding). The Egyptian government had just confiscated the assets of El Saadawi's women's NGO, and banned its publication *Noun*.

It was inspiring to hear a successful independent publisher share her experiences and philosophies, and it was a pleasure to hear an informed, nuanced, political conversation on feminism, words and women's history. Congratulations to Spinifex on its 23rd birthday, and thank you to Susan Hawthorne and Cynthia Troup for presenting the conversation.

Jodie Lea Martire

References (with thanks to Cynthia Troup)

Susan Hawthorne, 'The Forgotten Women's Writing Festivals,' at <http://australianwomenwriters.com/2013/05/06/the-forgotten-womens-writing-festivals-by-susan-hawthorne/>

Susan Hawthorne, 'To whinge or not to whinge,' at <http://www.spinifexpress.com.au/Blog/display/id=84/>

Kristen A. Hogan, 'Defining Our Own Context: The Past and Future of Feminist Bookstores,' *thirdspace*, vol. 2 no. 2 (2003), at <http://journals.sfu.ca/thirdspace/index.php/journal/article/viewArticle/hogan/114>

also

Betty McLellan (2010), *Unspeakable: A Feminist Ethic of Speech* (Townsville: OtherWise). [print book] <http://www.feministagenda.org.au/unspeakable.html>

Organic Publishing

The ecology of publishing is an issue which will stretch the minds of independent publishers in the coming decades. While megapublishing will entail more and more mergers, increased digitisation, convergence of book retailers and book publishers, and massive multilingual homogenised publishing, at the other end will be the small-scale publishers: independents and self publishers.

Writing and publishing are frequently small-scale ventures—and in this they can be said to share qualities with organic farming, just as organic farming has its best results when done on limited acreage. Staying small enables the farmer to produce something unique, a flavour or colour that can't be reproduced industrially. In the mainstream, one hears big business arguing that organic is only for the rich, and that by farming on an industrial scale agribusiness can produce food that the poor can afford. Farida Akhter in Bangladesh, however, has shown how people with few resources also ought to be able to eat healthy food, food grown without pesticides and without the intervention of companies like Monsanto (Akhter 2001; Robin, 2010).

Short runs reduce the unnecessary use of paper resources. Many of the large print runs also incur large pulping numbers, wasted books, wasted paper, wasted trees.

Thinking about the connections between the environment and publishing, one is struck by several similarities. The first is that of paper. Most paper in the world is produced from plantation forests, most of which are made up of exotic species, clear-felled to maximise profits for the forestry companies. Clearfelling wreaks destruction in a similar way to bombing. It is the destruction of forest ecosystems, because not only are the large trees felled, but undergrowth, micro-organisms, and soils are destroyed too. The bigger the publishing company, the bigger the print runs. Technology could help out here, by making it more viable to have short-run books, that is, books with print runs of 100–700 copies. Short runs reduce the unnecessary use of paper resources. Many of the large print runs also incur large pulping numbers, wasted books, wasted paper, wasted trees.

The publishing industry is one in which it is possible for booksellers to return unsold books to the publisher. This is also incredibly wasteful and is sometimes due to over-subscribing of books, especially to superstores and chains. Not only does it lead to waste of paper (when the returned books are deemed in excess and then pulped), it unnecessarily uses more oil and diesel in carting books back and forth along roads and other transport links.