

Explanatory Note: Cultural Sector Interviews

Australian Cultural Fields researchers conducted a range of semi-structured interviews (26 in total) with key government, industry and agency professionals to enhance our knowledge of the changing dynamics of Australian cultural fields since 1994, although often encompassing earlier periods. The interviewees are individuals with deep experience and expertise in their respective fields.

Following the completion of the project, several interviewees gave their permission for these transcripts to be uploaded to the ACF project website for wide public dissemination and reasons of posterity.

Interviews were recorded and professional transcribers turned them into text. In reviewing the transcripts, interviewers checked both audio and text for accuracy as much as was feasible. There is some variation in transcription style and notation, and in many cases further editing was undertaken in consultation with the interviewee (and, in one case, the person responsible for their estate).

The interview material was checked by the interviewers, interviewees (and, as noted, a representative in one case) and other members of the Australian Cultural Fields research team for clarity and accuracy. Often these transcripts are conversational in nature, and no attempt has been made to correct the inevitable *non-sequiturs*, grammatical errors etc. of 'organic' oral communication. Some interview sections were deleted at the request of the interviewees or because of potential legal implications. These deletions are flagged where it is necessary to preserve the overall coherence of the interview. The views expressed in the interviews are those of the interviewees.

These interviews were conducted with approval of the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (H11025). Subsequent approval to publish the transcripts to the ACF website was given following a research ethics amendment request. Some cultural sector interviews were not published according to the wishes of the interviewee (or their representative).

We extend our sincere gratitude to the interviewees and their representatives for permission to share these transcripts, and for their assistance in preparing them to be uploaded to the ACF website.

Australian Cultural Fields researchers are confident that these qualitative data, alongside other data analysed in our many research publications, constitute an enduring resource for future cultural research and debate in Australia and beyond.

Lyn Tranter

This interview was conducted in 2016 as part of 'Australian Cultural Fields: National and Transnational Dynamics' (ACF), an Australian Research Council funded Discovery Project (DP140101970). The project website is <https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/acf/>. The transcript was uploaded to the ACF website in June 2024.

Interviewee and position (at time of interview):

Lyn Tranter, Proprietor, Australian Literary Management

Interviewer: Professor David Carter, University of Queensland

Interview date: 30 March 2016

Interview location: Australian Literary Management, Balmain NSW

ACF field(s): Literary field

START

David Carter

Okay, I reckon that's going. I can see the numbers moving as well, which is good.

Lyn Tranter

Okay. Well, I'll just introduce myself then. This is Lyn Tranter from Australian Literary Management. I've been around the literary scene now for 40-odd years. I started out running a typesetting business and also doing readings around Sydney, organising poetry readings because I'd married the poet, John Tranter. Then I did a couple of tours to America funded by the Australia Council and also by the Department of Foreign Affairs and those were taking groups of four authors on two occasions on tours of North America. Those were funded again by the Australia Council. I then wrote a column for *The Australian*, a sort of literary gossip column under the name of Elizabeth Swanson for some years.

Then I set up Lyn Tranter Promotions and a strange thing happened. I decided that I didn't want to work in that area anymore and I went down to the Melbourne Writers' Festival and three people contacted me and said had I ever thought about becoming a literary agent.

[Name of individual] thought [they] would like to bankroll me to start something up and a man whose name I now can't remember, unfortunately he's died, had the same proposition. Then Caroline Lurie approached me. Caroline had set up the agency in 1980 but it was Melbourne-based and then she asked me 10 years later to come in with her and open up a Sydney end. That would have been 1990 so that's 26 years ago now. She decided to join Community Aid Abroad and went to Bangkok and I took over the sole running of the agency.

At that stage, I had Jenny Darling running the Melbourne office and I ran the Sydney one. Then eventually Jenny some years later branched out on her own and bought some of the backlist and authors she was representing and started her own agency, Jenny Darling & Associates. I moved everything to Sydney and I've been here ever since. One of the things that I think has greatly changed is that when Jenny decided to go out on her own — also in a way when I bought the business from Caroline — one of the strong components of the purchase price was the backlist because the backlist was a very important component of all literary agents. I now believe that the backlist is totally and utterly worthless. So that's been a real fundamental change within the industry because there's no support for the backlist by the booksellers and so they're just simply not available. They're available of course online. People can go in and buy eBook versions of them or something but it's not the same as it was 20 years ago when that backlist just kept on selling and it was a very strong component.

David Carter

Sorry, just to pick that up, one of the things that commentators talk about in the field is the shrinking window, that sense that the books that maybe had three months to make an impression now have three weeks. Do you think that's true?

Lyn Tranter

Well, I think Marion Halligan once said, which I thought was very right, she said your book goes out and it's like a carton of yoghurt with a use-by date on it and that never used to be the case. Occasionally you will get the bigger books that the booksellers will keep an eye on but the real fundamental change from 20, 25 years ago is that the DDS didn't exist. That's the Discount Department Stores. So there was no Kmart, there was no Big W, there was no Target. Well, of course there were but they didn't stock books.

Then the big whammy came when the REDgroup set up. They basically went into liquidation. No-one wanted to buy them. So we lost 20 bookshops which was a big, big

loss for a population of this size. Everybody was under the impression that someone would buy these but they didn't. No-one bought them. Then there was the assumption that maybe the independents would pick up the slack because the independents have been notorious for not supporting commercial fiction, and that's got its good and its bad side. So where did the sci-fi writers go? Where did the fantasy writers go? Where did the crime writers go? Where did the romance writers go? They were picked up by the DDS.

But now if you're trying to sell a book to a publisher, you've got to try and think how it's going to sell in terms of who is going to take it, because I've recently had, well, a year ago, a rejection from [a major commercial publisher] on one of my authors that said how fantastic it was and what a wonderful book. It did have a gay focus but it was more like a memoir. [The publisher] said they loved it but they said the DDS wouldn't take it and therefore they could only get it into the independents and the independents were ordering in such low numbers that they couldn't make an offer. That book to this day is still unpublished and I believe it's a very good book. But I think that is the reason for it and that's been a monumental change.

David Carter

One of the things that, and this is something that I wasn't fully aware of, the previous person I interviewed made the point that with the disappearance of the REDgroup and the chains, he said previously there was an overlap between the DDSs and the chains and an overlap between the chains and the independents and so in a sense you had a range, now you have a kind of a bifurcation in it and that middle ground is very difficult to...

Lyn Tranter

Yes, it's very true and it's the same way that you do with book covers. Book covers have just changed drastically too because you want to get a book out there that's going to also appeal to the DDS. My daughter's last book is out and I think the DDS will pick it up.

David Carter

Right. So even that – because one of the criticisms I've heard is that they buy large numbers of a small number of books, the DDSs...

Lyn Tranter

Well, it's even worse now. I mean that whole business about the industry is how short-sighted the publishers are and how lacking in vision and lacking in trying to think in a really business-like way. For example, what Kmart is now doing by branching into publishing is extraordinary and the impact of that could be just amazing. They're only starting out now. They're doing colouring-in books and cooking books. But I don't think for a minute that they'll stop there. If they can see that books such as Liane Moriarty or Rachael Treasure are selling around the 40,000 or 50,000 mark, they're going to realise what a huge audience there is out there for romance. So they will start doing that. Placement – money they're putting on books. They want them between \$5.00 and \$10.00. So the impact on that for the publishers again is huge because everyone in this country believes books are too expensive in any case. So, of course, they're going to go to the lower price.

You've got to remember, which no-one has really talked about before in terms of culture, the importance I think of genre fiction. It's always been such a stress on literary fiction, and genre fiction is just not to be sneered at at all and I find it sort of just amazing that you still get the powers-that-be, people in the Australia Council, who do have I believe a sneering attitude to it. People who are reading genre fiction, I also think quite strongly are not discerning readers so it's no coincidence that the latest, what's his name, Jeffrey Archer book went to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. I think anyone who is a judge of literature would say these are not very well-written books. But that doesn't matter. I mean, what he has is branding. You do get branding here with the literary fiction. So you get the Tim Wintons and you get the David Maloufs and you get Gail Jones and people like that. But their sales, aside from Winton, are miniscule compared to genre.

David Carter

Yes. It's interesting because the assumption is often that because genre fiction is commercially oriented, that it all sells in large numbers but that's not true either.

Lyn Tranter

That's not true at all. One of the big things that happened to me was 12 years ago, maybe even 15, I took on Sara Douglass and she was an extraordinary fantasy author and I think changed the face of fantasy publishing in this country because the Voyager imprint under Stephanie Smith was launched with her first book, *Battleaxe*. I think the whole *Battleaxe* series throughout Australia sold a million. Sara was an academic. She was a medievalist

from South Australia. She was an extremely good writer and she did incredibly well. She died about two years ago or so. She would be, to use the cliché, turning in her grave to see what's happened to fantasy now because it's just gone...

David Carter

I'm interested in that.

Lyn Tranter

It's really interesting. It's a fascinating thing. It's a really fascinating thing. Sara sold in these enormous quantities and she was so good. They were marketed and they were beautifully produced books, and huge. So you would put her on the scale of – if you were discussing crime and saying, "What's the high end?", you would say something like Umberto Eco with *The Name of the Rose*. Now at Voyager if you go there, Stephanie Smith is long gone now. She retired. With a first-time debut author, they will not go into paper. They go straight into eBook and if it sells 4,000 or 5,000 copies, then they'll go to paper. But it's not going to sell. It's not going to sell 4,000 or 5,000 copies because the net is awash with bad fantasy, of self-published work that sells for nothing. Harking back to whether the readers are discerning or not, I think a great deal of them in genre fiction are not discerning. So they're buying by the truckload these sort of books that are just available on Amazon for \$1.00 or for nothing.

David Carter

What do you think are some of the categories that organise, say, the way that publishers and booksellers think they're – because you mentioned literary, commercial fiction, genre fiction. For the publishers, say, do you have a sense of what some of the categories – well, they're probably categories that you have to address when you're taking things...

Lyn Tranter

The book still has to have these categories because they've got to know where to put the books. To think that that's not important is again ridiculous because you've got to be able to say – if you're a punter and going in and saying, "I'd like to see some crime books." "The crime section is there." Now that crime section could contain Peter Temple for example, who won the Miles Franklin. But we're not going to put him into literary. I don't know whether any of the bookshops ever did but if they did, they'd have to do it in both.

They couldn't just do it in the one. But he's an exception. I think that's the first book that I can remember that was in crime genre that won a Miles Franklin.

So that categorising, it has to take place. If I get an author who says to me, "It's really hard to categorise my text", immediately I'm going to say it's a no because it's obviously someone who's come from one of those ghastly universities. Then it's like, "Well, forget it." It's the same way that you market a film. How do you put a film out there? You've got to have the categories. You've got to have whether it's an X-rated, R-rated, G or whatever. You've got to have those. But you've also got to market it in a particular way.

David Carter

Very important for you when you're taking it to a publisher to be able to say this is a...

Lyn Tranter

That's right, yeah. I just saw *45 Years* the other day. Would you market that as a really miserable film for a couple who have been married for 45 years? Well, you're certainly not going to market it as a comedy, are you? So you've got to be able to put those categories onto things.

David Carter

What about the "literary" as a category? Does that work as a category in the same way?

Lyn Tranter

I think the literary is now the F word. I think it's the fucked. I've just got a manuscript now and I started it reading last night at home and I think it's brilliant. I just think it's absolutely brilliant. I have no idea whether I'd be able to sell it or not because it's literary.

David Carter

What would you do in a case like that in trying to...?

Lyn Tranter

I'm now incredibly honest with the authors and just tell them exactly what they're up against, because harking back to the earlier statement I made about the [memoir], that was an incredibly good book but I had to finally say to the author, "I can't sell it. I can't sell it here." eBooks have come and everyone panicked, or otherwise everyone said, "Oh my God. It's opening up a brand-new world." I believe eBooks are totally fucked. I think I mentioned on the phone to you the other day, if Pan Macmillan, with the money resources

they've got behind them and poured into Momentum for four years, run by Joel Naoum who's a really smart man, if they couldn't make that work, then no-one can.

David Carter

For some of the eBook imprints and some of the big publishers – I mean, there's been suggestions that the model is really you publish almost anything that comes along and one out of a hundred is going to take off and then you can go into print.

Lyn Tranter

Are you talking about where they're just offering you eBook rights only?

David Carter

Thinking of some of the – you know, a lot of the bigger publishers now have gone to digital-first publishing so they [overtalking]...

Lyn Tranter

Well, HarperCollins did with Impulse and they've just closed it down.

David Carter

So that model is not working.

Lyn Tranter

That model is not working. It's the same way with the two books that I published with Momentum which were both very good. One was a fantasy and one was a romance. I think the sales were around about 100. They had a team there and all their marketing was done through social media. So they're on Twitter, they're on Facebook, they're seeing who's buying what, contacting them again. It's a whole sort of focus on that group who are buying eBooks and we still have these monumentally low amounts.

David Carter

It's fascinating.

Lyn Tranter

It's absolutely fascinating. The highest sales of eBooks that I'm doing now is with a rural romance author and they're around about the 5,000 but she also sells extremely well in paper.

David Carter

So it might actually end up being the other way around, that it's the paper that supports the eBook.

Lyn Tranter

I think it will be. I think it's absolutely changed. The sales are going down. Look, people still want to hold something in their hand. It's as simple as that.

David Carter

The sales are going down. That's right.

Lyn Tranter

Their sales are going down. I can't read eBooks but mind you, I'm of that generation that naturally I wouldn't. Even people like my son who doesn't buy any newspapers anymore and reads all the news online, when he wants to read a book, he buys a book.

David Carter

That example you mentioned earlier, a book that you think is a brilliant literary title, it's probably going to be of limited commercial appeal, etcetera, are there particular publishers that you would think, "Okay, it's got no chance with x but maybe..." or particular editors?

Lyn Tranter

Yeah, absolutely. That's right across the board. If I got a book...

David Carter

So I think you can name names here. Who would you think of that [overtalking]?

Lyn Tranter

I'm happy to name names. If I got a very intelligent book that had really interesting ideas – I've got a book [like that] at the moment. My first publisher I'm going to send that to is Henry Rosenbloom. My second publisher would be Black Inc. I would never send it to HarperCollins. I could probably try Allen & Unwin. I would never send it to Pan Macmillan. These are just the obvious things. This is what an agent does and what an agent knows. I do think it's really interesting that you are coming to interview me as an agent because on the whole, when any surveys and things relating to the arts are done ... we're at the coalface. We know exactly what's happening out there.

David Carter

I think agents are the people who look after rights, I think, crucial, crucial...

Lyn Tranter

They're absolutely crucial and the only person I've ever had, and I've forgotten her name now, she ran the Brisbane Writers' Festival years ago, she came down to interview me to ask what writers of mine were good at public speaking. In all my 25 years, I've never been asked that. I've been to writers' festivals where I think, "Who the fuck invited him or her?" because they're just, you know, and a lot of writers are very solitary people and they're not good at public speaking. So no-one seems to take these things into account.

David Carter

Do any of the larger publishers, like...

Lyn Tranter

Well, there's only four of them now.

David Carter

I'm thinking of the Vintage Knopf kind of, where they have a kind of literary imprint within the larger house. Does that work for some of these titles as well?

Lyn Tranter

No, I don't think it works. I think that works in America because of the population. Here, I'm not immediately thinking, "Oh, I'll send it to the Knopf imprint" or "I'll send it to the Vintage imprint." I'm thinking, "I'll send this to Meredith Curnow" or "I'll send this to Jane Palfreyman." Possibly the only exception to that would be with Pan Macmillan, where there's a very clear definition between Pan Books and Picador and so you would naturally go to the Picador company. But that's about the only one I can think of. If I've got a literary title, I'm going to go and send it to Jane Palfreyman.

David Carter

That's where you have that sense of what might appeal to the...

Lyn Tranter

That sense. If it's Penguin, which I doubt will probably exist very soon....

David Carter

How does the “Australian” thing play out these days in all of that? There are some people who were saying that that idea, that part of what the game is about is supporting and building the national culture and saying that that idea has had its day, has disappeared.

Lyn Tranter

I find it really appalling that people try and stick these definitions on everything because they have no idea what they’re really talking about and nor do I because if it’s a good book, it’s a good book. It’s as simple as that and to say, “We’ve got to tell our own stories”, well, of course we’ve got to tell our own stories. But it’s whether that story works. Sometimes you get things that happen, that just come from totally left of field, and you think, “Fuck. How did that happen and what are the ramifications of that?” and that’s very much with *The Dressmaker*. So that was published 10 years ago by Duffy & Snellgrove, who then – he was losing so much money he closed down. That to me suggests that Rosalie Ham, the author, had actually tried other publishers because at that stage Duffy & Snellgrove was very small. Your first instinct is you’re not going to go to a really small publisher because you’re hoping the book is going to be really widely accepted. So clearly it wasn’t and Duffy & Snellgrove took it on. 10 years went by but Michael Duffy still held onto that title because he’d obviously got full term of copyright and kept the book in print. The book has now sold 150,000 copies. The film has made millions.

But what if you’re going to say, “All right. I’m going to now...” Let’s pretend that *The Dressmaker* never happened. I’m going to go to a publisher and say, “I’ve got this fantastic book. It’s a great bit of magic realism, really weird little Australians being very Australian. Would you be interested?” It goes to the acquisitions meeting and they say no. But that’s exactly what *The Dressmaker* is. It’s magic realism. It’s an Australian story. It’s not going to travel overseas. The film hasn’t got a distributor in America yet even though it’s taken millions here. So I don’t think you can put those sort of labels on something. It’s really hard to categorise that. It’s a bit like what we did in the eighties, talked endlessly about multiculturalism and ethnicity. Where did that go? Nowhere.

David Carter

It hasn’t developed, yeah.

Lyn Tranter

It hasn't developed at all and everyone is still running around and saying, "We must publish a diversity of voices." Must we? If it's a good book, it's a good book.

David Carter

The diversity will come or it won't come.

Lyn Tranter

Yes, that's right.

David Carter

I find someone like Christos Tsiolkas interesting...

Lyn Tranter

Very interesting.

David Carter

...because he dips in and dips out of that multicultural ethnic thing. His career, his identity as a writer doesn't depend on it.

Lyn Tranter

No, not at all.

David Carter

But it's there if it serves the purpose of the...

Lyn Tranter

He's a very, very good example of that because is *The Slap* a book about ethnicity? I don't believe so. I think he came up with a fantastic idea, a fantastic concept of can you bash another person's child and it just was a hook...

David Carter

Yeah and the fact that it's set in suburban Melbourne, so of course some of the people have a Greek or other background.

Lyn Tranter

That's right, yes.

David Carter

I think people haven't acknowledged that enough. They're trying to "type" it.

Lyn Tranter

I don't think they acknowledge it at all. But the people who don't acknowledge that are the academics and people such as the Australia Council.

David Carter

What do you think about the government policy, the environment, the context...?

Lyn Tranter

I hate it with a desperate passion.

David Carter

Do you think that has changed dramatically over time?

Lyn Tranter

I think it's changed hugely.

David Carter

What do you think some of the changes...?

Lyn Tranter

Part of the problem is, my husband who is a very highly-regarded poet and has been around for 500 years, he won't now go to the Literature Board at all because about five years ago he got rejected three times in a row. The last book he had published won more awards in Australia than any other poetry book. He picked up Queensland, New South Wales and won Best Book at Adelaide. Finally he went into the Australia Council and talked to them about it, and he told me that the reason given was that the application he put in, he didn't stress enough the diversity and the role that his new book was going to be. That is totally appalling. It's as if someone got the DNA of Patrick White and recreated him again and he applied for a grant and they all knew he'd won the Nobel Prize and they said, "No, we can't take that into consideration."

I won't go to them anymore at all. I really hate them because they had a thing – well, for example, in the eighties I did those two tours to America which I think were highly beneficial, particularly to say someone like Michael Heyward, and I just went to them and

said, “I want to do this. This is an outline of what I’ve got, who I want to take and this is my rationale” and I got the grant. So if I go now to the Australia Council, if I want to go to Frankfurt or London and I want to take some titles that are backlist, I’ve got to give them a rationale for it. I won’t do it. How dare they ask me? How dare they? With the reputation I have, to ask me why I’m taking a backlisted book – do you know why I’m taking it? Because I think I’ll find a publisher. I’m taking it for one reason and one reason only, and I’ve got to justify it.

I had Valerie Lawson who had done a book on P.L. Travers and that book had been published for something like six years. It had done its dash. It had been published here very well and in America but I hadn’t got England. Then Cameron Mackintosh put on a Mary Poppins play in London. So that year, I applied to the Australia Council for a grant to go to London and I had to give a rationale on taking Valerie’s book.

David Carter

Did the movie give it a bit of a boost?

Lyn Tranter

The movie, I got a very, very good deal as a tie-in with Simon & Schuster for a new edition for the film. So for someone like the Australia Council to come to me and tell me that I’ve got to give them a rationale is insulting in the extreme. They should be absolutely thrilled that any agent who’s got a standing record would want to put themselves through the bloody hell of going to Frankfurt or London because they seem to be under the impression that it’s a bit of a walk in the park and it’s something you’ll have a great time with and go and have drinks. It’s such hard work, it’s not funny.

David Carter

Do you think that’s driven by budget constraints there?

Lyn Tranter

No. They don’t know how it works.

David Carter

Yeah, because there used to be – if you think of the people say who were on the Literary Board previously, it was a very close relationship between the people who were making decisions and the book community.

Lyn Tranter

Tom Shapcott and Rodney Hall, people like that who knew it and now we've got bureaucrats in there whose background is running a writer's festival. That gives you no background. My pet hate at the moment is the writer's festivals. Sydney put out a thing the other day saying they're having 400 participants. You know what? That's too many. It should be 200 and they should be paying the authors here three times what they pay them and only have 200 people.

David Carter

That was going to be one of my questions, what you think of this new festival culture.

Lyn Tranter

I think it's so appalling.

David Carter

The literary prizes and...

Lyn Tranter

Oh, the literary prizes, thank God they're there because there's some way that the authors can make some money because they're not making it from their sales anymore. They're really not. I mean, Robert Dessaix just won the non-fiction award for this down in Adelaide. Thank God he did because a book of his which is sort of basically essays will still have solid sales in this ghastly environment, but they're around about 6 or 7,000. He can't live off that.

David Carter

That's right, yeah. What would be your sense these days of, to use your term, solid sales? Not for Robert but say for a first novel or a second novel?

Lyn Tranter

Well, that's a very, very good question, and one of the really great tragedies is that I think years ago when you had a debut author, they went out and they sold 3,000. That's gone. They go out now and they sell 600. No-one can make the money work. No-one.

David Carter

So are you getting a bigger split these days between the people who sell say 600 to 1,000 and then the people who sell 50,000 to 100,000?

Lyn Tranter

The ones that are selling 600 to 1,000, I don't think they're going to get published anymore.

David Carter

So it's the kind of the fewer bigger books model.

Lyn Tranter

And do you know, to a certain extent that's not a bad thing in that I do think there's over-publishing. It's the same way as there's an over-production of films, particularly in America where you get films that are made with budgets of millions and they come out and they're only showing for three weeks, and television as we know it is going to go any day now because I don't know anyone who just sits down and flicks on the ABC or flicks on Channel 10.

David Carter

I'm terribly old-fashioned in my television views.

Lyn Tranter

I know. I do too and I just watch ABC and SBS, but I'm of that generation. My assistant who works for me who's a young woman with a couple of kids, she gets everything from overseas. She does Netflix.

David Carter

I get no pleasure from...

Lyn Tranter

That's what they do. So where you had people spending millions of dollars on advertising with MasterChef, that's going to go. It won't be tomorrow, it won't be next month, maybe not in a year but it's going to go and how they're going to keep – what their revenue stream is going to be like and what they're going to do, I don't know.

David Carter

How much do you think these days any of the publishers use that old model, which apparently was quite common, of say using some of the better sellers to cross-subsidise some of the quality books...

Lyn Tranter

It's gone completely.

David Carter

So every book now has to have its own profit and loss...

Lyn Tranter

You've only got to look at poetry. John with Philip Mead did the *Penguin Anthology of Modern Australian Poetry*. There's no doubt that that book was subsidised by Penguin by sales of *The Cook's Companion* or something but that's gone completely, which is why there are no major publishers of poetry anymore.

David Carter

Picking up a couple of other things that we mentioned earlier just on that thing of the policy environment, I'd be interested to know what you thought of that short-lived proposal for the Book Council of Australia.

Lyn Tranter

It was a joke. It was a total joke.

David Carter

You don't think it had any potential positive aspect. Do you have a sense of what kind of government support there might be that would be beneficial, particularly to the literary field?

Lyn Tranter

It's very sad because you're supposed to learn from history and they don't. For example, I think one of the best literary magazines we ever had was *Scripsi*, which was Michael Heyward and Peter Craven. The only funding they could get from the Australia Council, and this still applies, is for the payment of contributors. That's insane. That's totally and utterly insane because that means that the editors work for nothing and if they are paying

the contributors, they've then got to hire someone to control those payments because you can't be an editor and have a job, which you have to be an editor, and then run a payroll sort of system. Most of the contributors would be happy to have quite a low fee.

But the fact that they never took it into account to pay editors, and they still don't, shows you exactly their mindset. It's a huge issue, I think. That *Scripta* is 30 years ago now and they still haven't come to terms with that, and if you went in and spoke to them they would again come up with an argument of why they can't pay the editor. And they're sitting there on salaries of \$100,000.

David Carter

Do you think the grants for individual writers are still a crucial part of the system?

Lyn Tranter

I think they're a very crucial part of the system. It has to be peer assessed. I think for the Australia Council to not give subsidy to publishers of poetry and to give writer's grants to poetry continually is stupid in the extreme. Where are they going to get their books published? Give it to the publishers. They seem to sort of think that the publishers are the enemy. The publisher is not the enemy when you've got terrific publishers such as Scribe, Transit Lounge, Black Inc. These are good people with good intentions. Why not give them a subsidy to do it? Why give the poets – the grants come out and I look around and I think, "God, I haven't heard of any of these." What's the point? If they're going to get the grant to take some time off, yeah. Now, let's get started on the universities and the creative writing schools.

David Carter

Let's get started on the universities.

Lyn Tranter

They should be all shut down. I think they're just running in the most obscene way to get people on board to pay a lot of money, to give them a degree that's utterly and totally worthless. It's as simple as that. If anyone comes to me with a degree from UTS or the University of Western Sydney in Creative Writing, it makes absolutely no difference to me in reading that manuscript and in all likelihood it's going to be a no. I mean, one of the things I've heard recently, I think it was UTS, was now only going to be marking novellas. You know what? You can't sell novellas. The bookshops won't stock them and yet they're

marking someone on this and they're saying, "If you do this, you'll get this mark." Historically we all know, and I've had first-hand experience of it, of people working in those university systems with paying students who failed them and being told, "You can't."

David Carter

It's difficult. It's bloody difficult.

Lyn Tranter

It's being told, "You can't."

David Carter

Yeah. I think our best people going through are people who have done the hard yards as writers and then decided for whatever reason to come back in and do a degree only because...

Lyn Tranter

That's a totally valid thing. But they give them the degree just to get a job in academia though, teaching creative writing.

David Carter

I know our creative writing people are desperate to get their students doing some of our literature courses so they read. They said, "These people want to be writers but they don't read."

Lyn Tranter

My daughter has been teaching at Berkeley and she also did her PhD at Rutgers. Before getting her doctorate, she had to have Latin and another language. That doesn't happen here and you could never make it happen. The amount of reading she had to do was phenomenal, absolutely phenomenal.

David Carter

Our doctorates are very overrated.

Lyn Tranter

And here we've got, "I can't set that book because it's too long." I mean, it's a disgrace. It's a total disgrace and it's a total dumbing down, and if you don't read that book, if we're going to set *Voss* – mind you, why would the university set Australian texts for God's sake

— but if you are going to set Voss and they don't read them and they don't read the book, fail them. But they've paid. You can't.

David Carter

But then it would come back to us and say, "Your course is not appropriate for the student."

Lyn Tranter

Yeah. That's right. Let's put something really short on that they'll like.

David Carter

There are so many literature courses around, the great short books of the world. Even something like in Australian literature courses, almost nobody teaches *Such is Life*, for example, now because they think no-one can read it.

Lyn Tranter

I know, yeah.

David Carter

Last year I did *For the Term of His Natural Life* and the students loved it.

Lyn Tranter

Of course they did. It's a great book.

David Carter

I told them at the beginning, "You are all used to reading long novels" because this is the generation that have grown up reading Harry Potter, long fantasy. They probably read Sara Douglass and other things. I said, "You're used to reading long adventure-romance novels. Use your skills to this." I kind of gave them permission to enjoy it.

Lyn Tranter

You're obviously a very good teacher and that's a really wonderful approach and I'm sure it worked.

David Carter

I don't know if I could pull it off with *Such is Life*.

Lyn Tranter

Give it a go.

David Carter

Just to go back to one other thing, for one of your books you used the term, something like 'commercial fiction' or 'good commercial fiction'. I am really interested because so often the discussions are very simplistically divided between literary fiction with a capital L and genre fiction, and there's a whole area in between of things that might never be in the frame for Miles Franklin but they're not going to appear on the romance shelves or the crime shelves or the fantasy shelves, and it's a category that we don't quite have a language to talk about. I'd be interested to hear...

Lyn Tranter

No, we don't. It's a very good point. So this is a classic example. I took this woman on...

David Carter

Claiming Noah by Amanda...

Lyn Tranter

Amanda Ortlepp. It's published by Simon & Schuster and it's going to be released in America, I think it's by Hachette, this month. She just has a new book out. This is her second one, titled *Running Against the Tide*. So *Claiming Noah* came out, first-time book, sent to Larissa Edwards at Simon & Schuster because she's got a very good feel for commercial fiction. She was one of the people, when she was I think at Random House, who picked up *The Da Vinci Code* for the Australian rights. I think this is a very nicely-written book. It is not literary fiction. It's got the subject of surrogacy and she writes very nicely. It's that thing that they use in commercial fiction a lot and I think it's quite a good word, which is it's a page-turner. What you want to find out is what happens. So this woman, her baby is stolen from her, so the whole thing is a search to find her child. But meanwhile, there's another egg sitting in there that's been transplanted into another woman and she's had that child. It's a good old heartthrob...

David Carter

Engaging in terms of the characters.

Lyn Tranter

Yeah. It's not a romance though. It's not literary but it's solid commercial fiction. I just recently read Liane Moriarty and I hadn't. People had been telling me for ages to read her. She's very top-selling in the *New York Times* bestseller...

David Carter

A friend of mine just went to the US and sent me back a photo of one of the New York bookstores with her books.

Lyn Tranter

She's huge. So *Big Little Lies* is her last book and it's set with a group of women in a preschool. It follows their lives in this book. One of the characters in it, she's married to an extremely wealthy man. She's got two children. He travels a lot and they have a luxurious lifestyle, they really do, and everyone is very envious of her. She's outwardly incredibly glamorous and very beautiful. There's only one problem. He beats the shit out of her. It's one of the best exposés of understanding domestic violence that I've ever read and it's got a really lovely scene in it where the children go to bed and she's actually asked one of the children to pick up the Lego and he said, "I'm too tired, Mum" and she said, "Oh, that's all right. I'll do it" and the husband said, "No, get him to come back and do it" and she said, "I don't mind. I'll do it." So she picks up all the Lego and puts it into a big box. They've got a big box there with the Lego in it and she sits back down on the couch. He goes over, he picks up the Lego box and he comes over and he dumps it on her head. It's brilliant. So his violence is not on that scale that she's got a black eye all the time but it's pretty close. But it's a lovely explanation of it. I loved that. I just thought, "I can understand this" and I also got to understand why this woman wasn't leaving him. You know, he was a good father. He was a great provider. He bought her presents and jewellery all the time but he was just very violent.

We have the Stella prize coming out and you look down and you think, "Oh well, same ol', same ol'" and you look down at the Miles Franklin, "Same ol', same ol'". Would they have Liane Moriarty in there? Never. Never. And I want to know why because I think it's a very well-written book. It's a good book. I'm just fed up with that whole idea of anyone saying with literature, "It's not so much the story. It's really what it's about. It's about family disconnection or it's about ethnicity or it's about alienation." Hello? Can we just have a good story? Is there anything wrong with having a good story?

David Carter

And the book that you've just described *is* about family disconnection and all of those things.

Lyn Tranter

It's about all of those things and it's beautifully written.

David Carter

It just does it in a kind of more straightforward way in some sense than...

Lyn Tranter

Yeah. It's the whole sort of thing of saying it's beautifully written. There are so many books that I've seen on the Miles Franklin shortlist that I've never been able to finish but I do agree are beautifully written. But if I'm not engaged, I'm not engaged. Don't make me read something because it's mood-writing. That sold 10,000 copies.

David Carter

It's interesting because it's just an area that certainly from the academic world, there is just no vocabulary really for talking about books like that.

Lyn Tranter

No, there isn't a vocabulary and there's no way that this woman could apply for Australia Council grants.

David Carter

Yeah, because it would be seen as commercial fiction.

Lyn Tranter

Yes, commercial fiction and she would be able to live off it. But that's not the reason that the Australia Council wouldn't give her a grant. It's because it's not high-end literary...

David Carter

Yeah. It's more the value structure. You just mentioned advances. People have written about the phenomenon say a decade back in America of advances going up, which I don't think ... It never quite happened here, that they didn't jump up...

Lyn Tranter

No, I think we did have very high advances at one stage. I don't think they exist anymore.

David Carter

For novelists or more for things like retired politicians and sports...?

Lyn Tranter

No, more for people like Peter FitzSimons. You've got to put your sports category in there because those books do extremely well. So it's your sports books and your historical books, so your books on *Gallipoli* and... like *The Lost Diggers* by Ross Coulthart, I was paid a very handsome advance for, and it earned out. I do think one of the things that's changed is the... I could be wrong but I think from 10, 20 years ago, often publishers would be paying high advances so they could get the author, so they could have the prestige. I think that's changed. They now more are going to say, "I'm going to put up a very high advance because I know they sell so well."

David Carter

Is that because the field has stabilised a bit so there isn't so much jockeying for that prestige?

Lyn Tranter

I don't know if prestige really comes into it anymore, even. I mean, Peter Carey was published by Random House and then he left and went to Penguin and the great irony of course is now that Penguin is being swallowed up by Random, so once again, he's a Random author. I won't go there. So I think that's a real indicator because he is a household name in terms of being high in literary... but I don't think his sales are as great as some people think. I think the only one who straddles, and this is the interesting thing I think, and we have so few of them, who straddles literary and commercial is Tim Winton.

David Carter

It's an extraordinary... He's always there in the – I've looked historically at the bestseller list. It tends to be Bryce Courtenay, Tim Winton, this is going back a couple of years, Matthew Reilly up there.

Lyn Tranter

But you see, Courtenay couldn't write, O'Reilly can't write, but Tim can. But he straddles and that's so unique. There was a window I think of opportunity where Peter Carey could have straddled but he didn't. He slipped back again into high-end literary and so he's right. The *Kelly Gang* was his big one. I'm a great fan of his work, by the way. I think he's a terrific writer.

David Carter

Where would you put someone like Tom Keneally?

Lyn Tranter

I never read Tom Keneally.

David Carter

He's such a complicated case. I just read the most recent novel, it's probably not the most recent anymore, *The Daughters of Mars*. In terms of story, of character, two central female characters, utterly convincing to me in terms of their psychology, their emotions, all of that, fascinating story of nurses in the First World War, etcetera. It seemed to work on every level, but in another sense nothing stayed. I enjoyed reading it, put it down, nothing of it went deep.

Lyn Tranter

He lucked out with *Schindler's List*. He stumbled across one of the great stories of all time. But I've got no further comment to make on Tom Keneally.

David Carter

This is again going back to something we were discussing earlier. One of the things that's often been said is that despite the presence of the Big Four now here in Australia, that to be successful the big multinationals have to operate as local publishers in the local marketplace. This is one analysis of the situation, that some of the doomsday stories about everything being swallowed up by the big multinationals, etcetera, etcetera, aren't accurate because those multinationals have to operate as kind of local publishers addressing the local market, etcetera.

Lyn Tranter

I don't know if that's going to continue. I think it always has been the case and I think they've always had a strong Australian list and have wanted to have a strong Australian list. But one of the things we haven't mentioned of course is parallel importation, and if that comes in I don't know what will happen, because if you're going to publish, if Penguin here offers to publish Peter Carey's next book, I can't see how they can possibly just offer Australia/New Zealand territory and the reason for that is if Peter Carey is then published by whoever in America, Hachette say, then Hachette will dump the lower-priced Australian book here and the Australian sales will be gone.

[recording interrupted]

Lyn Tranter

...to get across to the great unwashed about how terrible it is if this goes ahead because what it will mean is a lot of Australian authors will not be able to be published overseas and yet meanwhile, the ghastly Australia Council bangs on and sends endless groups of people over to India or Taiwan or somewhere to explore international rights for authors and yet they don't understand that if parallel importation comes in, those authors are not going to be able to publish overseas because the Australian components will take world rights because they'll have to protect themselves from dumping...

David Carter

So they'll have the world rights but they won't actually be able to do much with them outside the Australian...

Lyn Tranter

No, they probably won't do anything with them. Well, they certainly will only do it if it's with their parent company. So if Random House publishes a book here and they've got world rights and they try to sell it to Random in the UK or the US and they say no, are they going to send it to Simon & Schuster to publish? No.

David Carter

It was interesting, a few years ago I spoke to [a rights agent at a major publisher] and I was very surprised – this was a wakeup for me, I hadn't realised it. [The agent] said, "We get no special privileges selling to [our parent publisher]."

Lyn Tranter

They get none. [Publisher] doesn't either.

David Carter

[The agent] said, "I'd put it on the same plane as selling translation rights into Europe. It's as hard", whereas I just imagined you'd ring up your equivalent in the US and say, "Here's this book."

Lyn Tranter

Simon & Schuster, they turned it down in America and it was sold to someone else. That's all the time. Yeah, that is another perception that people have, that the multinationals will

support their parent company. This is particularly so in the UK. It's not so much in America because the Americans don't care about Australia. I mean, we're so small, you know, 24 million people is nothing. They're over 300 million. The UK do because their market is so bad and they've got to get Australia/New Zealand rights. Of course it's terrible for the author because then they just pay export royalties. But if you're trying to sell a debut author into the UK and your day in the ANZ is gone, your chances are very, very small. I know one instance where it's happened recently with a [publisher] author, that they published that author in the UK and the advance was \$2,000.00. That was with a really small publisher.

David Carter

Yeah. It's still really only the Tim Wintons, the David Maloufs and the Peter Careys who can automatically assume they'll have Australia/New Zealand rights, US rights, UK rights separately.

Lyn Tranter

Yes, and of course they don't sell. They don't sell overseas. Sara Douglass probably sold more overseas than any of those people. She did very well.

David Carter

Great stuff. We could keep going for a lot longer, I think. Just to finish up, the future, what do you think some of the positives and negatives might be about prospects for the future?

Lyn Tranter

I think there's been an overwhelming underestimation of the impact of the 'net and the publishers have just ignored it. Some of them are waking up a little bit but basically they've just kept on thinking that they'd be able to operate in the same way. So the fact that people haven't faced the reality of changing reading habits I think is really scary and just shows how narrow-minded they are and how they're not coming up with any real ideas about what to do. And I don't know what to do. This is just sort of nihilism on my part because I really don't have a thing of saying this is what should be done. But I would have hoped that they would. I would have hoped that we're going to get a band of intelligent, creative people in publishing houses who can see a way through some of this and try some new things. But that doesn't seem to be happening. So I really don't know where we're going with it all and I don't think we will until – well, the technology is going so fast

now, though. Someone mentioned to me the other day that they thought that there was a Korean children's book – because one of the things that hasn't been successful with eBooks is children's books — but this was a Korean book where the text was actually read out aloud to the child from the book.

David Carter

Has the 'net in terms of ePublishing made it harder for authors to make a living?

Lyn Tranter

Oh, yes. Oh, absolutely.

David Carter

So a publisher is much less likely to give real advances and...

Lyn Tranter

Absolutely, and it's sort of bizarre in a way, you know, we had the *Fifty Shades of Grey* episode because it's like a one in 500 million chance, and we do get these books that come across. *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* or...

David Carter

I remember that.

Lyn Tranter

...or *The Da Vinci Code*, you know. That's how old I am. But on the whole, they're out there and they're selling zip. If you look at Amazon, the amount of publishing is just phenomenal, isn't it? Just absolutely phenomenal. So I hark back to Pan Macmillan and what they tried to do with Momentum because I think it's very sad. I think they made a really, really strong effort there to try and understand that eBook publishing and how to get in touch with readers and they failed big time.

David Carter

That's interesting. I might follow that one up.

Lyn Tranter

It would be good if you could talk to Joel. I'm sure the people in Pan would supply you with a contact number.

David Carter

I think that's very interesting because if you had this conversation a year ago, you would have been saying, "Look at Momentum. Here's a sign for the future." With a non-fiction title, say with the Malcolm Knox, the Ross Coulthart, the Phil Hughes book...

Lyn Tranter

They do very well.

David Carter

What would their kind of figure – for the sales?

Lyn Tranter

We're probably talking 20,000 plus. Nothing like Peter FitzSimons. Again, he is a phenomena. But some of Malcolm's sports books have done 100,000. Sorry, it's very important actually, this is a very important piece of information. Men are the hardest people in the world to buy presents for. They're really difficult, particularly as they no longer smoke. Oh, the days when people smoked, you loved it, you gave them a lighter, you gave them a pipe, you gave them a cigarette case. It was endless and that's all gone now because no-one's smoking. So you give them a book. You give them a sports book or you give them a political book. So that's where the sales are there. They're firmly focused on men because women buy books for men to read. The men don't go out and buy the books but they give them those sort of books because they're the books they think they'll like, and they can do phenomenally well.

David Carter

I've just started looking at the results of our survey about people's reading preferences and so on, and one of the things that is – it's not news but it's just been reinforced, just how gender-imbalanced the whole reading culture is...

Lyn Tranter

It's women that buy books.

David Carter

...and participation, browsing in bookshops, everything is just massively biased towards women. It's fascinating just to see how strong that's the case. The non-fiction books do well in hardback.

Lyn Tranter

Yes. They're always published in hardback because they're seen as gifts. I think things have actually got worse in the last just even 18 months, because I had this book come to me, *The Country Wife* by Anne Gorman, and one of the things just very briefly we should touch on is the acquisition meetings and the detrimental effect that we have with sales and marketing who are such strong participants of it and who don't read.

So Anne Gorman had – you know when you say tick the boxes? She had the boxes that went all across the boxes. She was 82, she'd never written anything, it was a memoir. I got a publisher, a wonderful, wonderful woman called Fiona Henderson who was then at Random House. I gave her the book and I said, "Look, this is something special. This is a woman who came from Sydney, who married a 'cocky' [farmer], went on the land, had five children, and then he dropped dead. So she raised the five children, she kept on the land, and then she finally came back to Sydney. She became very involved in politics and women's issues. She's 82 and she's fantastic. I know Fiona fought tooth and nail to get that book through in acquisitions. So it got published. She got five pages in the *Women's Weekly* and it sold. I don't think I could do that now because she doesn't tick those boxes and that's a shame.

So we are going to see the death of some of our important cultural books I think, because I think this woman's life is really fascinating and culturally important. We are going to see the death of that, without a doubt.

David Carter

So it's going to be a more predictable, narrower...

Lyn Tranter

Absolutely, yeah. I think the sales and marketing people should be taken out, just not let in. The old days were that someone like Hilary McPhee took on an author, went to the acquisitions meeting, her and Di Gribble or whoever else sat around and said, "Yes, we'll publish it." Then they went, "Hey, sales and marketing, come on in. Here's the book. You think of ways to sell it." Sales and marketing then came and said, "We can't sell the books because what you're taking on are duds. So we want to sit in on the meetings so we can help make the decision on what we think will sell". And they shouldn't be there.

David Carter

So that would be one of the big differences between the Random Houses and the Scribes and...

Lyn Tranter

Absolutely. If Henry believes in a book, he doesn't have to answer to 12-year-olds. He can say, "No, I'm going to publish that book." I did a book a couple of years ago with him on the Fromelles by a first-time author. It was a really terrific book and it sold very, very well. I didn't even try the multinationals. I wouldn't even bother. Why would I bother?

David Carter

As you said before, that would be an absolutely critical part of your role to match the book, editor, publisher.

Lyn Tranter

Absolutely. The matching is terribly important. It really is. I also know there are some authors of mine, I wouldn't sell them to particular publishers because I just know they wouldn't get on.

David Carter

Yeah, and they have that eye for the quirky book that has that chance of breaking out...

Lyn Tranter

Yeah. I love the quirky book. It's one of the things I was proud of myself – Peter Twohig, *The Cartographer*, was such a really special, wonderful, wonderful book. Anyway, we did the second one.

David Carter

Thanks for all of that. That's been absolutely fantastic. We could keep going for another three hours but you've probably got work to do.

Lyn Tranter

I've got to go and read a manuscript.

David Carter

What about getting books noticed these days in the review pages and so on?

Lyn Tranter

Well, the pages are shrinking. You've got no control over that. I've got no control. I'm sure when people see that big spread that was done on Kirsten [Tranter] on the weekend, they think, "Oh, it was probably the mother that had an influence on that." I had no influence whatsoever, and she's in bookshops, display windows. Again, I've got no influence on that. So I don't think we've got any control over that. I just wish that they would stop reviewing so many overseas titles. I really do. That ghastly *[The] Saturday Paper* which doesn't give the names of the reviewers. God, I hate them for that. They reviewed a Jonathan Swift book recently. Who reads Jonathan Swift anymore?

David Carter

Yeah. I mean, we don't have to prove that we're part of the international world anymore.

Lyn Tranter

No. I would like to sort of shake them for reviewing all this overseas stuff. At the tip of our finger, we can all read this stuff online.

David Carter

ABR does that as well these days. It's like they review, an academic book on Jonathan Swift, which is interesting, but what's it doing in *ABR*?

Lyn Tranter

What's it doing in *Australian Book Review*, yeah.

David Carter

And the answer would be, well, we can't just be narrow and look at Australian...

Lyn Tranter

Oh, for heaven's sake. Why not?

David Carter

Yeah, that's my response.

Lyn Tranter

That's a great book. [shows hard copy of new title]

David Carter

That's one that hadn't come across my radar at all.

Lyn Tranter

Very small press called Affirm. It wasn't reviewed anywhere, of course.

David Carter

That's what made me ask that question because I thought – yeah.

Lyn Tranter

And interestingly enough, Big W put in a huge order.

David Carter

Isn't that interesting?

Lyn Tranter

Yeah.

David Carter

There was that article – was it Big W? There was an article in one of the papers the other day that – well, probably six months ago or more now, but it was a typical kind of headline that was something like 'The Most Powerful Woman in the Australian Book Industry' and I think it was the buyer from Big W.

Lyn Tranter

Yeah. The buyers are so important. People don't realise. But one of the really sad things I think is the buyers from the independents now, they're just ordering in such low quantities.

David Carter

I caught the train in and got out at Town Hall station and I happened to see that Japanese bookstore, the Kinokuniya.

Lyn Tranter

It's a good bookshop.

David Carter

There's nothing like that in Brisbane.

Lyn Tranter

No. It's a very good bookshop.

David Carter

Yeah. If I didn't have to carry things back, I could have bought 20 Australian novels there. The only way I can get them in Brisbane is buying them online, which means I tend not to do it, whereas if I browse, I'm a sucker, I want to buy them.

Lyn Tranter

Absolutely.

David Carter

That's not going to sustain anything if they're buying in tiny quantities.

Lyn Tranter

No, it's not. I remember Jon Attenborough years ago, he ran Simon & Schuster, I was talking to him about why he didn't have an Australian list. He said, "Do you know why? Because if my reps go out and they take Wilbur Smith out, the bookshop is going to say, 'Yeah, we'll take 40 of those' and if I go back out and say, 'I've got blah-blah here, new Australian debut novel, terrific book, thriller', they're going to take three. So your punter walks in and he sees a huge pile of Wilbur Smith and the three books he's ordered by the Australian are up on the shelf where he'll never see them. That's why I don't have an Australian list." Bless his heart, at least he was honest. I really do wish the booksellers would support Australian books more. Some of them do in a very, very good way. I'm not critical of all of them, but others I think could do a lot better.

David Carter

I wonder how much the online selling direct from the publishers' websites is having an impact?

Lyn Tranter

I don't know but I think Booktopia is doing very well. Do you know them?

David Carter

Yeah. I don't use it but...

Lyn Tranter

I've used them a couple of times, mainly for getting books from overseas. Caroline Baum has got a review thing that she does and last month she gave a very nice review for Kirsten's book. But I think they're doing quite well, which is good to see.

David Carter

Yeah. Maybe that will pick up a little bit...

Lyn Tranter

At least it's in opposition to Amazon.

END