

## **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.

## **Beverley Cousins**

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 February 2024.

***Interviewee and position (at time of interview):***

Beverley Cousins, Fiction Publisher, Random House Books

***Interviewer:*** Professor David Carter, University of Queensland

***Interview date:*** 20 April 2016

***Interview location:*** Random House, North Sydney

***ACF field(s):*** Literary field

*Update to Penguin Random House (PRH) commissioning structure: Since the interview with Beverley Cousins in 2016, Nikki Christer has moved into the role of Publisher at Large. Holly Toohey is now Publishing Director at Penguin Random House Australia.*

### **START**

**Beverley Cousins**

And it's a commercial fiction?

**David Carter**

Well – and that's, actually, exactly the reason why I was interested in talking to you.

**Beverley Cousins**

Okay, mmm. As long as you're aware.

**David Carter**

So this is David Carter interviewing Beverly Cousins from Penguin Random House. And, look, I picked up online an interview that you did for, I think it's the *Australian Literature* site or something.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. Mm?

**David Carter**

And it was precisely the fact that, you know, you were involved in the commercial fiction list that interested me because one of the things I'm interested in for the project is, you know, the way that our different senses of different parts of the literary field are understood from different points of view. I mean, we're used to thinking in terms of the literary versus popular fiction or genre fiction or something like that. And the trouble with – I mean, there are lots of troubles with that but it leaves out that big middle space that we – in a way we don't have a good term for it. I've picked up the term that the American publisher from a few decades back, Al Silverman, I think his name is, he spoke about good commercial fiction.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, yeah.

**David Carter**

Well, I might start off just by asking you to say a little bit about your background and your current position but then we can talk a little bit about, you know, how you understand that zone that you work in.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. Well, I had 20 years in the UK – I'm British – and so I worked in London publishing for – for 20 years. And for most of that time – I worked my way up but most of that time I was working solely in crime fiction, crime and thrillers...

**David Carter**

Mm.

**Beverley Cousins**

...first for Macmillan and then I did people like Minette Walters and Colin Dexter – inherited them, I didn't discover them, I wish I had but I – and a few other authors. And then I moved to Penguin to do their crime and thriller list there.

**David Carter**

Right, mmm.

**Beverley Cousins**

And then what happened was I just had a bit of a moment where my husband and I thought it would be nice to have a year in another country. And my books, my Penguin books, were doing very well in Australia so we asked if I could have a secondment to Australia. So I actually came out and worked at Penguin in Melbourne as a – on a secondment, so I was actually still working for the UK. This will be relevant to what you're after. I was still publishing for the UK but I was working in the Australian offices.

**David Carter**

Right.

**Beverley Cousins**

And then on a purely personal level, my husband and I and the kids decided we actually wanted to stay. So in order to stay, I needed a sponsor so I came hunting for a job and Random House offered me the job but not as a crime fiction as commercial fiction, so doing all levels of commercial fiction, which actually came at the right time for me because I'd worked with some great commercial fiction publishers in the UK but I'd never actually published – other than crime fiction, I hadn't published anything else. So I'd sort of soaked up all their experience and I'd watch them and I'd seen them in action but I'd never been able to put it in practice for women's fiction or for any other kind of fiction other than crime. So I came – I felt I came to it quite fresh, you know, to the market. I had a, sort of, very UK sensibility about commercial fiction, which clashed a little bit with here but in a good way, I suppose, which is getting on to what you were kind of saying, was when I – in the UK, commercial fiction is – is the biggest area of the market, you know, the literary market.

Obviously we have, in the UK, wonderful literary writers but commercial fiction's where it's at. When I came here, I found that because of the way the Australian market is, where a lot of it – where a lot of the books that are sold are brought in from other countries and distributed, the commercial fiction tended to be the American and the UK imports.

**David Carter**

Interesting.

**Beverley Cousins**

And a lot of the local fiction, not exclusively but a lot of it, was more on the literary end.

**David Carter**

Mm.

**Beverley Cousins**

So when I started to work in commercial fiction, I actually found it quite hard dealing with agents who didn't quite know what I meant by commercial fiction and – some did, some didn't – and wasn't – I wasn't really getting the kind of submissions that I was expecting, that I would have expected, the number I would have expected in the UK, it was much smaller here of authors that were writing in the commercial area. That was, you know, getting on for 10 years ago. That's changed now but certainly that pulled me up a bit, that I wasn't expecting to find that the Australian writers tended to do more literary – on the whole, tended to do more literary work.

**David Carter**

Yeah. So picking up on your point there about changes, I'd be interested to hear more about that, that what has changed there that – you know, is it – I mean, I sometimes have the impression that there's something I sometimes call like an expanding middle...

**Beverley Cousins**

Yes.

**David Carter**

...in some ways.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yes, yeah. No, I think that's true. I think there has been, I have noticed – and whether it's just because I've got more into the market since, you know, I've been working here for that number of years but it does feel that there are more authors who are seeing that they want to write commercially, they want to write popular fiction. I don't want to say exclusively that there weren't very few – that there were very few Australian writers writing commercial fiction. There were, obviously, but to the percentage and the ratio that I'd had in the UK, it was quite a shock. But I think there are more agents now taking on commercial writers and there are more opportunities for people who are writing more genre and in the commercial side. And what there is, which is what you've picked up on, is there's this middlebrow, this middle section, which no-one has really come up with a name really for it. We call it cross-over here.

**David Carter**

Right.

**Beverley Cousins**

Um, but I've heard middlebrow before...

**David Carter**

Yeah, and that can get people very upset.

**Beverley Cousins**

It can be because it seems like it's – you know, it's a sort of wishy-washy, it's mid-list but it doesn't actually mean that. It's actually the holy grail of publishing to be in that middle, mid-brow cross-over, you know, spot.

**David Carter**

And how would you define that? What distinguishes it from – and I know these categories are all blurred...

**Beverley Cousins**

Mm.

**David Carter**

...but what would distinguish it, say, from the literary, on one end, and from the more explicitly genre fiction, you know, that that fits neatly into fantasy, science fiction, romance, crime, on the other hand?

**Beverley Cousins**

I think it's the way it's done and I think that's probably – a lot of it is judgement on our part rather than someone writing specifically for that. They've written a book and the publishers maybe have judged, I think this is commercial, it's very readable, it could be sold to readers who buy in Big W but it could also be sold in the independents.

**David Carter**

In the independents.

**Beverley Cousins**

So it's really a kind of a judgement that we make, not necessarily – I don't know whether many authors deliberately set out to do it, probably they do...

**David Carter**

Yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

...but it's more a judgement that we make that we think, when we look at it, yes, we can sell this across the board because it tends to be with some romance and with crime and some of the more real genres they'll probably only sell in the DDS stores [department and discount stores].

**David Carter**

Mm.

**Beverley Cousins**

You know, we'll – we'll push them hard in Big W and Kmart and Target.

**David Carter**

Yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

And then, on the literary side, we will probably not really try for DDS because they won't take them. We'll go for all the chains and the independents. And so it's getting those books that we judge that will be readable for the whole market. And that really is a judgement, probably, on the quality of the writing, some of the themes, maybe. Maybe we think it's well-written and it's got literary themes but it's accessible in the way they've written it.

**David Carter**

Yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

I mean, one of the examples I have is *The Light Between Oceans*, which is – I published.

**David Carter**

Yeah, you mentioned that in this interview, which – I was interested.

**Beverley Cousins**

That's the only one I've published on the Vintage list. We actually published on a literary list but that was a lot to do with the author's sensibility and how it was being published elsewhere in the world.

**David Carter**

Mm.

**Beverley Cousins**

But we, from a very early – very early on, I suppose, because I was the commercial fiction publisher, saw that it would sell to, I dare say the lower-end but the Big W market...

**David Carter**

Broader end.

**Beverley Cousins**

...the broader end, that's a nice way of putting it, because it had themes that very, sort of, water cooler themes. You know, what would happen if you looked after a child that you thought you could have as your own, because they were on an island and a child washes up. They're on a deserted island, the child washes up, there's no-one else around so they



adopt – they look after it. It washes up in a boat. But then you find out that there is a mother on the mainland – this is set in the 1920s – who has lost her child and it was all these issues of, you know, what's right and what's wrong and should the child stay with them, should the child go back to...

**David Carter**

Yeah, yep.

**Beverley Cousins**

And so there were the universal themes that were book club themes and things that you could really play up in the media that would appeal to the broader side of the market as well.

**David Carter**

So that made me think, what you just said then about the book club and so on, how you think of your audience, your target audience, your readers.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. Well, cross-over again is where people might say it's a perfect book club read. It's that one where you could have a discussion, you know, and you could talk about the themes. And people in the book club who might be – don't read as much, will find it easily accessible. And then people who are on the more literary side will find it, you know, an interesting read for them.

**David Carter**

Substantial as well.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. So book club is often another word that we might say that it would sell. I mean, on the genres, it tends to be not book club. I mean, we don't say every book that we publish is a suitable book for book club. And a lot of my list won't be. It'll be more the literary side that we would see them being book club. So the genre list, I would tend to think of my readers – my readers – as being more Big W, the Target, the Kmart, Booktopia, you know, e-book readers, e-book particularly in commercial fiction. So that's where I kind of focus my attention and then, if I'm lucky, I can say this book will spread to certainly the chains; I

mean, Dymocks, I would want to publish in Dymocks and NewsLink. But certainly in terms of the independents...

**David Carter**

It mightn't go Gleebooks.

**Beverley Cousins**

...they're not my – yeah – they're not my, sort of, target audience. And...

**David Carter**

Yeah, yeah. There's probably some that do but that's not where...

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, yeah, there certainly is. And from my colleague who does literary, she's doing the more – that other end. She does the independents and the chains and she's not so worried – well, I was going to say, she's not so worried about the DDS. She needs to be now in order to sell enough copies. You can get on to that, that's another point.

**David Carter**

Yeah. I interviewed someone a month, or a couple of months back, John Hunter, who has worked at various publishers and he was up at our place so I took the opportunity to interview him. And one of the things he really wanted to talk about was the effect of the collapse of the REDGroup. And he said, "Look, you know, previously you could either target independents and the chains or the chains and the DDS's but you had the chain in the middle as the link. And he said one of the things that's happened now is you have more of a polarisation so you have to go independents or DDS's and that middle space is collapsed.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, I agree, I do agree. And I think my area benefited from – I wouldn't say they benefited in the sense that I wish REDGroup was still here but the collapse of them I didn't suffer as much as some other areas of publishing. When our Borders disappeared, Big W took a large section. I mean, Collins took a large market share, Big W increased their market share as well. And Big W are actually great because they do support writers. It sounds like they're just a kind of – Target and Kmart tend to look at books as products. Big W have this wonderful buyer called Meredith Drake and she had a bookselling

background and she very much sees the books – she sees it as a little, sort of, bookshop within the store so she does promotions, she supports debut writers. She actually physically tries to sell the books whereas Kmart and Target tend to be just stack them up and hope. You know, they do an island but that's about all you get.

**David Carter**

Yeah. And they tend to have a small number of titles and they won't...

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, and they don't replenish very often. But Big W, hats off to them. They really...

**David Carter**

I must go and have a look.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, you should because it's really interesting. They have a What's New wall where they promote the big books but they also put a debut, maybe, in there. You know, she has catalogues that she promotes the new authors. But obviously she doesn't take all the literary titles. So from my area, her picking up the slack, some of the slack, was great because it actually broadened some of my market. The only downside on my side was the fact that it's all eggs in one basket in many ways because I wasn't really going for the independents. So when you've got less chains, you're really going for Big W. And if Big W doesn't take it, you can have your print run halved in...

**David Carter**

Exactly.

**Beverley Cousins**

...and which is what my colleagues who do literary fiction find. That, really, if they can't appeal to Big W, they're going to have a very small print run.

**David Carter**

Yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

So I think it's affected them more, the change has. Maybe that's why, actually. Maybe that's why there are more people writing in commercial fiction now because it's slowly pushed towards the – sort of the mass market outlets. Having said that, I should say we found out last week that the independents are really holding steady. They haven't dropped. But it certainly is the case now that for a big company like us, in order to make money we have to have a certain print run. And for the literary titles, it's a lot harder to do – get that print run if you don't have Big W on board.

**David Carter**

Yeah. Could I ask about print runs because I'd be interested in the commercial fiction area, what would be typical, what would be – you know, what would be – you know, what you'd think would be excellent in terms of sales?

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. I suppose a good result would be 8000. We publish in trade paperback so 8000, 10,000 would be good. I think our cut off would probably be 6000, you know, about 5000 or 6000. And then anything, really, anything over, you know, 15,000, 20,000 is good.

**David Carter**

Mm. Does 6000 make it hard for first-timers or...

**Beverley Cousins**

No. I mean, you would kind of – 6000 is what you would think, well, okay, that's good, we can carry on with them. It would depend, really. I mean, I have authors who aren't selling that but I think they will so we stick at it.

**David Carter**

Yeah. One of the things that some analysts have said is that – often a little bit sceptical about some of these things but, you know, one of the big changes has been that previously in smaller houses, you had cross-subsidies between titles. You know, when you get to the larger houses and the marketing people take over from the editorial staff and each book has to make a profit in that way.

### **Beverley Cousins**

It does but it's not quite as drastic as that. I mean, I have to juggle profit and loss costings and, you know, how I have to juggle that with, sort of, the creative side as well. And I think, probably, 10 years ago or 15 years ago – and I'm expecting the same here as in the UK – I could give an author a lot longer to develop than I can now. I mean, I remember someone I knew in the UK used to publish Ian Rankin. You know, Ian Rankin didn't break out until his – book nine. And I remember him saying that every time he went to an editorial meeting, he had to beg to keep Ian Rankin on the list because they were ready to let him go. And then he wrote – his book nine was his break-out and then he was kind of huge. Probably that wouldn't happen now and I think...

### **David Carter**

Yeah, but you could still, for someone who you think, look, you know, I don't think this one's going to get into any best seller list but let me stick with it for...

### **Beverley Cousins**

I think I would – I would stick with an author if I think eventually they'll get to the best seller list. I've got a few authors that I think are so talented and we've just got to find a way of building them and making them get to the level of sales that they really should have and so I'll stick with them. And pretty much, you know, as a company I have to be fair to the big company, I'm allowed to do that, but there obviously are other authors that haven't hit the mark. You know, maybe we think, well, maybe they're not going to work and we'll let them go at a much earlier stage than perhaps we would have done a few years ago. I think it's unfair really to say that with big publishers, it's all about the money because it isn't. We're very much told here it's about the creative side but I'm not lying in that we do have to, sort of, make a profit at the end of the year and we have to answer to our shareholders. And I expect it's for some independent publishers, the smaller ones, it's easier to take a punt than it is for us.

### **David Carter**

To take a punt, yeah. I mean, one of the other things that analysts of the field often say is that to be successful, even a large house or a mega house, in the case of Random House Penguin, has to act small in the local market.

**Beverley Cousins**

Mm, mmm.

**David Carter**

In effect, you have to act as a small to medium publisher...

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, yeah, we do,

**David Carter**

...in this market. You can't just be an importer.

**Beverley Cousins**

No. I mean, that's what's great, I think, about all the publishers here is that they are very committed to having a local list. You know, there's always the risk of parallel importations like that, that you could just suddenly become just a distributor and not have – like, I mean, we were a very small department in Random House but there's myself doing fiction, I have a colleague doing literary fiction, one doing non-fiction and then there's someone who comes in three days a week and commissions non-fiction as well. That's it.

**David Carter**

Sorry, if I can – who's doing the literary...

**Beverley Cousins**

Meredith Curnow.

**David Carter**

Right, okay. Yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

She's quite a sort of a well-known person.

**David Carter**

Yes, I know. I haven't met Meredith but I know the name very well.

**Beverley Cousins**

And my publishing director is Nikki Christer.

**David Carter**

Nikki Christer, yep.

**Beverley Cousins**

She commissions less and less now. She's group publishing director now so she looks after Penguin as well so she's commissioning less. So, really, on the Random House side, there's only four of us that are commissioning. And we do have to work in a small group. You know, we are kind of boutiquey in that way and we have our lists and we know who – we sort of have our areas.

**David Carter**

And you were suggesting at the beginning, too, when you were talking about the differences between the UK and the Australian market, that you have to know your local market.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yes. And I've had to learn it pretty quickly, you know?

**David Carter**

Yeah. What do you think some of the differences are? You mentioned earlier that thing about the role that that idea of Australian literature played which didn't really have an equivalent in the UK.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. But, I mean, I've always wondered why – you know, I don't want to sort of suggest that there's not this great literary tradition in the UK, obviously there is but I think it was more – here, it was more a case of if you want to have a local voice people saw it as being expressed in a more literary way. That's how I've always interpreted it. And that readers who wanted to read the fast-paced crime novels were happily being fed by the UK and the US or Europe whereas if you wanted to actually express an Australian voice, it tended to be on the more literary side. That was how you got your cultural...

**David Carter**

It was supported by policy, by government, you know, cultural policy to promote.

**Beverley Cousins**

Right, yeah. So I think the interesting thing now, the most successful Australian genre is rural romance which is very much in advance in Australia.

**David Carter**

Yeah, but does that come within your range?

**Beverley Cousins**

Yes, yes, I do those, yeah.

**David Carter**

Yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

So I think that, to me, was a difference. It's not so much that there was less literary in the UK, it was more that here I think it was – in order to, sort of, bat against this kind influx of commercial fiction from abroad, the only way to stand strong was to have a really strong literary tradition.

**David Carter**

Yeah. Would you think of your books as – without defining anything in advance – your books as contributing to Australian literature, whatever that means?

**Beverley Cousins**

I suppose it depends on what you say by literature.

**David Carter**

Yeah, exactly.

**Beverley Cousins**

I mean, I come from, I suppose, a background which literally is the literary side but I think if we're talking about – my books do contribute. The commercial side does contribute a lot to Australians reading and getting people reading. And the better Australian commercial fiction we can have, then the more we can get that culture out to Australian



readers rather than them having to just soak up the cultures from abroad, you know, which is rural romance. I'm not suggesting that rural romance is literature. I mean, I don't think many of the authors themselves would say that they were writing literature but they are writing stories to express what a lot of people in Australia are enjoying reading. And you can't sell them abroad. Well, you can sell them in Germany, Germany loves it.

**David Carter**

That's right, they do, yep.

**Beverley Cousins**

But it's the Australian-ness is coming out of these books and that only really happened in the last few years. I mean, obviously there were – I might be talking out of turn because I wasn't here when – you know, in the early 2000s but, really, the rural romance is authors that I know of like Rachael Treasure and Nicole Alexander and Fleur McDonald. They've all come up in the last, sort of, five years maybe.

**David Carter**

They're recent, yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, yeah.

**David Carter**

Yeah. What about that question of overseas? Are you involved at all in targeting books for overseas sales as well?

**Beverley Cousins**

Our books to sell...?

**David Carter**

Yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, we try as much as we can to get them sold. It's usually a closed door. It's very hard. The UK tends to say it's a bit too Australian for us, you know, and America is very – a closed shop. But we do try and sell our books – Germany just loves Australian books, particularly the country ones. So we will target them and our rights department will try as

much as they can but it doesn't often happen, you know? It's very lucky if anything other than Germany it's sold in. Having said that, I've got a great crime writer who's – that we publish here, who we edit here, who has been sold to America and not in the UK but she's pretty much every other European country.

**David Carter**

Who's that?

**Beverley Cousins**

Candice Fox...

**David Carter**

Yep, yep. Yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

...who's a fantastic writer. And she's one of those authors that we will stick with because we believe that she is going to do great things, you know?

**David Carter**

Yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

So, yeah, so I mean she's been sold. We didn't sell her, the agent sold her but she's been sold around the world and film rights and TV rights.

**David Carter**

Does the crime come within your portfolio? Well, if you get something that is clearly in the crime or thriller genre, do you pass that off to...

**Beverley Cousins**

No, no, I do crime.

**David Carter**

As well?

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. I mean, to be honest, I don't do fantasy and I don't do horror. Well, I've done one horror. My background wasn't really – as I said, it was all in crime fiction. And in the both companies that I worked at where I was doing crime fiction, they didn't do much horror or sci-fi. And the one that did do sci-fi and fantasy, you had a very specific publisher who knew exactly what he was doing and he was, like, a little on his own so I never really saw a lot of what he did so I never felt comfortable about publishing into horror or sci-fi fantasy so I haven't really done that. So, really, my list is women's fiction, romance, crime and thrillers and action thrillers.

**David Carter**

Yeah. But do you think that that commercial fiction zone is very much gendered, is very much a female area?

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, I think. I was talking to my colleagues yesterday about – I'd looked at what I published on my commercial fiction, well, what I'm publishing this year, and I'm only publishing two male writers. And next year, at the moment, I've only got one contracted. I mean, hopefully I will have more. But at the moment, I've only got one contracted. And that's not what – that's not deliberate and that's – I want to address that. But I think, yeah, the women are writing – for me, women's fiction is a very strong market, romance is a very strong market. Crime can be male or female writers – I tend to have female crime writers. And the readership for all of those tends to be highly female.

**David Carter**

And the book club population is highly female as well.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. I mean, I think that's how it's naturally. Without really meaning to, my list is slightly moved to being more female-oriented. And I don't think that's because I'm female, I think it's more just the way – the ones that have worked and the ones that have dropped off have been the male writers and the male adventure stories and the ones that have clicked have been in the more female crime and female, sort of, readership, which is interesting because if you look at some of the biggest writers, you know, local writers, you know, Matt Reilly and Bryce Courtney when he was – you know...

**David Carter**

Yep, yep.

**Beverley Cousins**

...they were selling more than anyone, or they are still, so they were the big names but no-one's really been able to find replacements or, sort of, successors to them.

**David Carter**

No. And in the next band down, I mean, it's not a good metaphor but it's all women.

**Beverley Cousins**

It's all women, yeah; Di Morrissey, Judy Nunn, Monica McInerney, the new one is Liane Moriarty. She's just taken off. Yeah, it's all women. Yeah.

**David Carter**

Yeah, yeah. No, I think those changes are fascinating.

**Beverley Cousins**

Whereas I'd be interested – I don't know the difference. I know that Meredith has a lot more male writers on her literary list than I have so I guess that's how it's kind of skewed in the male, female.

**David Carter**

The blokes take themselves too seriously.

**Beverley Cousins**

We also tend to even think, certainly in commercial fiction, is that the men – that women buy for men in my area because a lot of men will read Judy Nunn but they probably wouldn't be the ones that go in and buy it. Or their wives might buy it because it's on a subject that they would be interested in, like Maralinga or something like that. They might choose to do it but it doesn't tend to be them going in and buying.

**David Carter**

Fascinating. Yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

That's a generalisation but that's what we say. Yeah.

**David Carter**

Yeah. Sorry, I'm jumping around all over the place here. I mentioned before the aspect of policy and that's one thing that we're looking at in the project. Now I don't know whether in an institution like Random House Penguin, whether shifts in government policy have much bearing on what you do at all. I know they can be very important for some of the very small houses that are directly dependent upon that.

**Beverley Cousins**

Look, I'll be honest and say I'm not an expert in that side of things and I think it hasn't really affected me. What will affect me is the parallel importation restrictions.

**David Carter**

That was the next question, yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. But that will – and I'm not an expert on that either but I know it's not going to be ideal for us if the restrictions are removed and it becomes an open market. Other than that, I haven't been affected that I'm aware of. My publishing director might be more aware of those kind of things than I am. And on the literary awards side, they sometimes get supported though sometimes they're not. They're all not my area, really, either. So, yeah, so the only policy that I'm, sort of, aware of that could affect me is the parallel importation.

**David Carter**

Yeah. What do you think or fear might be some of the effects of that?

**Beverley Cousins**

Well, I think the main effect could well be that we end up distributing more, you know, and our local publishing shrinks because we just think it's not cost effective to be – to support – you know, we actually need the money from – well, which one, I'm not, sort of, explaining it very well but I think it would be easier for us to then just make money by importing cheaper books in than it would be for nurturing and investing the money in local talent. And I think that's what's worrying us is because it's – I think all the publishers think that the local market is so important and having the local authors. That's why we're fighting it so much. It's not so much you're going to affect our...

**David Carter**

Bottom line.

**Beverley Cousins**

...bottom line because certainly for the big publishers who have UK and US arms, it'll just be a change of balance. But for us local publishers and the smaller ones, it would affect them quite a lot, I would have thought. And we were looking at interesting statistics yesterday that we actually have quite cheap books. Everyone has this, sort of, assumption that we have very expensive books in Australia...

**David Carter**

Australian books are more expensive.

**Beverley Cousins**

...but they've actually been doing some research in order to fight this parallel importation and has found that actually on the whole, because the UK and the US publish in hardback a lot of the time, our books are actually cheaper in the first instance. So I think we're feeling that we're going to be squeezed and the local authors will get lower advances, there's be less published and the culture, Australian culture, will be completely surrounded by, you know, imports.

**David Carter**

Yeah, yep. No, that's...

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. I'm not an expert on it, though, and I know there's plenty of people in the building that are.

**David Carter**

Yeah. But also it's partly from the perspective of – from the publisher perspective they're interested.

**Beverley Cousins**

My publishing perspective is it's quite – if it happens, it's quite likely that my list would be...

**David Carter**

Shrink.

**Beverley Cousins**

...shrink, yeah.

**David Carter**

Yeah. What about things like literary prizes. Do they have much bearing on your area?

**Beverley Cousins**

No, not the only literary prize that I have – well, I've won, by my author – my author won – it was the *Light Between Oceans*, which is the only literary book I've – or the cross-over book I published and that won a lot of awards. And, again, the awards don't necessarily always lead to sales. In this case, it did because it won so many and obviously my boss, Nikki, won with Richard Flanagan, she won the Booker. Sales went through the roof. But literary prizes don't necessarily always lead to sales. And, certainly, in my area, the literary prizes, such as the crime fiction awards and the romance awards, they don't make a difference to sales. So, really, I think here only the Booker and the Miles Franklin probably make much difference to sales. In my area, there's Ned Kelly Awards, which is crime fiction, and the Ruby awards. They won't make any difference. Candice has won two Ned Kellys in a row but it hasn't made any difference on her sales at all.

**David Carter**

Yeah. What about reviews? I mean, a lot of your books would struggle to get reviewed.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, yeah. Even more now. I mean, that's the other big change that's happened in the last couple of years is it's hard for anyone to get reviews. I mean, the review pages have shrunk. There was a horrible statistic our publicity manager gave us. I can't remember exactly but it was, sort of, going from six pages to two pages, you know? And they will – in my area, they'll only really review a big name now. To get a review of a debut or a lesser known commercial fiction is almost impossible. What you might get is the little round-up that they've taken from your blurb anyway which is then syndicated. So you might get the novel mentioned in a lot of different papers but it won't be a review, it'll just be your little sound bite or your blurb that you wrote yourself that you suddenly appear.

## **David Carter**

So what do you think matters most in terms of a book taking off?

## **Beverley Cousins**

I think word of mouth, which happens for literary and for commercial. I think a lot of it is word of mouth. I think it's presence in stores, you know? And I think that's the two key areas for us, really, is to make sure that Big W has a good display of them. I mean, it really comes down to that in the end and that Dymocks and NewsLink have good displays of them and that we can find novels like *The Light Between Oceans* where it gets people talking and it gets people discussing and, you know, people want to recommend, you know? And I think the balance of having it available and obvious in the stores and getting their support, which often means buying their support and buying space in the shops and buying promotions – which I don't think a lot of authors realise how much goes into – actually how much spend goes into getting them into the shops. It's a combination of that and having something that would – kind of word-of-mouth which we'd try to generate on social media and obviously we try to see...

## **David Carter**

I was going to ask about the social media, the reading sites and so on. Don't you think they're increasingly important?

## **Beverley Cousins**

And what's been great about the merging of Penguin and Random House is we've now got this massive social media platform. We have so many people on our mailing lists and on our newsletters and our Facebook and our Twitter feeds that we actually think we can make quite a difference with our social media promotion. And because we've got such a large, sort of, readership now for subscribers, that we can actually narrow them down so we can actually see their profile and we can work out they read crime fiction so we won't target them with everything. We'll just send them – did you know there's a great thriller coming out you might want to read. So it's going straight to the people who would probably pick it up rather than scatter-gunning it, which is what adverts on buses and outdoor advertising is, it's just scatter-gun, it's just hoping that people will – you know, one in 1000 will go there whereas I think now that it's cheaper and also you can go directly to the reader in a way that marketing 10 years ago couldn't.



**David Carter**

I don't know how I'd ever prove this but I have a sense that there's – one of the things that social media has done is create, I don't know, some sense of a strong attachment between reader and author, book publishers...

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, yeah.

**David Carter**

...that, you know, people are very active in almost putting together their own portfolio of – authors or books or something.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, look, I think people are, because they also feel a bit closer to the authors. I mean, we do encourage our authors to not spend all their time on social media but to have at least one platform where they can feel – that the readers can feel that they can interact whether we run it or whether the author runs it but we try and have that so that people can become more locked into a brand name or locked into an author in a way. And then you can see the new Judy Nunn's coming out and you can let people know early on, get people talking about it early on because the fans will start spreading it around. The rural romance writers have been very clever in setting up their own group who are rural romance, so they're very competitive with each other but they also feed off each other...

**David Carter**

And you're now getting kind of sub-genres within rural romance as well I think and...

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, the horse ones and some mining ones and things like – yeah. So I think, yeah, social media's brought the reader and the author – probably less the publisher but the author and the reader a bit closer together. And when the author doesn't want to do that we tend to do it on their behalf. And we have to really – we have to sort of be very open and honest, I think, with our audience on Facebook and things. We have to let the reviews that are bad stay up there, like any company has to. We have to interact with them and see why they're saying something isn't working. So they have to have our level of trust so we have to be – I think there's more honesty now about the marketing. We have to be very clear with them.

**David Carter**

Yeah, because people know if they're being managed or...

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, I think they do and we don't want to be going out constantly saying, "This is the best book you'll ever read," and then the next month, "this is the best book you'll ever read." So we have to be a bit more careful that we don't spam people, we don't – you know? So it's kind of an industry that they do it down on the end of the...

**David Carter**

I mean, it sounds as if that – I mean, we use the term mass market but in a sense, you know, you don't actually just throw things out to a mass market. You do have a sense of quite different – I don't know what you'd call them – taste groups or, you know, author-base or something like that.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, yeah, we've done lots of research and Penguin Random House does just a huge amount of research into the customer, which I'm sure the other publishers have got as well. You know, and you name them, you name them – there's Brenda and there's Caroline and there's – you know, there's James and there's, you know, Bruce, which the marketing people use perhaps more than the publishers do. But they will think about, okay, so Bruce will only read two books a year and he'll tend to buy them from Kmart and, you know, Caroline might read 20 books a year and she's in a book club and that's how we kind of – they kind of think of them, which helps them strategically work out where to advertise and where to position the book. I think from a publishing point of view, from my side of things, we tend to have a sort of a gut reaction of who we think is going to read the book. So I'll probably go to my acquisitions meeting and say, "Okay, I think this is for female readers 25 to 40. You know, they're going to be – it's going to be heavily Big W, maybe NewsLink, you know?"

**David Carter**

Would that – sorry, I’m interrupting there but just picking up on what you said, would they be your first kinds of reactions would be, you know, this is an X kind of book rather than a Y kind of book for this kind of reader rather than that target reader?

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. I’m always thinking, I mean, I’m always thinking. Even the agents will say, they’ll try and position it very clearly. Publishing now is very much the sound bites. You know, our sales teams really only have two seconds on every book, you know? So what we have to provide is very clear – a clear picture of what this book is, which can sometimes mean reducing it down, which is unfortunate but it is very much...

**David Carter**

A sentence or two...

**Beverley Cousins**

As soon as I’m reading the plot synopsis before I even read the book or I’m reading the agent letter, I’m having to make a judgement on where would this fit on my list, where would this go, where would we sell it? When I raise a book, and we’ll talk about it at acquisitions, about how good it is, how well written it is, the themes, you know, how promotable the author is. We’ll also talk about, well, how would you package it, how would you – how do you see the cover looking, you know? It’s all thinking sales as well.

**David Carter**

Do you think there’d be the possibility of getting a good book but one that, you know, you and the marketing team and others struggled with because it didn’t fit neatly anywhere or...

**Beverley Cousins**

Well, it has to happen because otherwise we’ll just always be doing the same books over and over again so it – there has to be that moment where you get a book and you just think this is just so amazing. And that tends to be then it’s the passion and that’s still very much alive here. I mean, I think it could be so easy to think that we are just looking at numbers all the time but, really, the publishers, myself and my colleagues, have to have that passion. And we can go and then sell it to our colleagues and say, “But I have to publish this book.” And hopefully they trust you and they go, “Okay.” And hopefully that

enthusiasm then carries into the sales and the marketing teams. So they will then tailor it to – in another way is that, okay, this isn't like anything you've ever read but you will be knocked out by it. You know, and they'll sell it in that way.

**David Carter**

Yeah. Do you ever have a sense of – or does this happen more in smaller houses – saying, you know, this is a Random House book or, you know, this is a book that fits in some ways with the identity of the list of the house? Or you look at it and you think, you know, yeah, it's pretty good but it's more a – a something else book?

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. Only in the sense that I would think, this is more a small independent one rather than something that could work because it might be more of a risk which we can't take as many risks maybe as a small one can. Or the market might be quite small but that'll be fine for them because their overheads are small but we need a certain – to sell a certain number. I wouldn't necessarily be saying this is more of a Penguin book than a Random House book.

**David Carter**

No, because...

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. I mean, I'd be saying this is more my book than Meredith's book or I might be saying to Meredith, "I've had this in from an agent but it's not really for me, it's for your list."

**David Carter**

Yeah, this might go into Vintage or not.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah.

**David Carter**

Yeah. Do you have imprints within your portfolio?

**Beverley Cousins**

Yes. So I publish mostly for Bantam and for Century and Meredith is publishing for Vintage and Knopf. But it's fluid. I mean, if she had something that we suddenly thought could be very commercial, she might put it into Bantam. It's not – we're not rigid. But I don't have that sense, really, of the big publishers of Penguin, HarperCollins, Pan Macmillan. We're all kind of similar in my area, I think. Allen and Unwin may be slightly different because they are that big independent and they can publish a little bit differently, I think. They do a lot more cross-over, I think but, no, I wouldn't actually. My publishing director, Nikki, might now have to because there'll be books that'll come in and she might have to say, because we're one company, Penguin can go for it or Random House can go for it and she might not – probably not in fiction but in non-fiction areas, she might make a judgement. I think Penguin might be better at that or...

**David Carter**

Right. If one of the houses had a particular line in World War One...

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. We're quite good at sports so she might say...

**David Carter**

...non-fiction or something.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, exactly, yeah. We're good at sport, she might think that publisher – that author might feel better served with Random House because we've got more of a, you know, tradition in sport. Or Penguin might have a tradition in something else, you know?

**David Carter**

But not so much in the fiction. Yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah.

**David Carter**

Do you ever go to hardback or it's pretty much trade paperback for everything?

**Beverley Cousins**

I've done a hardback special edition for *The Line Between Oceans* and another one of mine was *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* because it sold so well in trade paperback and so well in mass market paperback that we thought we'd do a little edition. Because they were cross-over, we might sell a few little gifty ones at Christmas...

**David Carter**

Special edition but...

**Beverley Cousins**

...so we did a little tiny...

**David Carter**

...not the old model of hardback first and then into paperback if it takes off?

**Beverley Cousins**

Not the UK and – no, no, we don't do that. Yeah. And, in fact, I mean, I was just looking at how very few authors now are published in hardback in fiction. Di Morrissey is. Kate Morton was in hardback. They've put her into trade paperback and her sales have gone really high.

**David Carter**

Gone up, yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

So I don't think that's – with that experience I don't think you'll get many publishers at the moment saying let's try hardback. It won't. It's all about price, particularly for the DDS stores, you know? And it's how much they can discount. It's all about – the average selling price is much lower...

**David Carter**

Much lower.

**Beverley Cousins**

...which is what the government needs to realise, that because so many books are now sold in the DDS stores that...

**David Carter**

Under discount to get a much higher...

**Beverley Cousins**

What the customer is actually paying is a lot less than what is on the, sort of, you know, the actual retail price.

**David Carter**

Yeah, yeah. And before I forget, you mentioned e-books as being very important in your field as well.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. I would say my area has been the biggest – has had the biggest benefit from e-books. Commercial fiction...

**David Carter**

Have you've learned how to make money out of them yet...

**Beverley Cousins**

No, not really.

**David Carter**

...because that's one of the issues that...

**Beverley Cousins**

Well, you can make money if it's just backing up the print edition not e-book only. No, that's really been...

**David Carter**

Do you do much of that? You do it first?

**Beverley Cousins**

I did but we're not doing as much now. Every publisher got on board and said we must have our own digital lists. And they're all slowly disappearing because it's...

**David Carter**

What was at Momentum, they...

**Beverley Cousins**

Momentum have cut their lists, haven't they?

**David Carter**

Recently, yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

Or have they gone? I'm not sure if they've gone or they've cut their list in half or something. We've certainly had a list that we are not continuing with. I think if you're doing a digital only, you have to be – I mean, Momentum was – we all looked at Momentum and said, "This is our example of if you're going to do it, you have to do it – you have to be focussed on it and you have to know your market and you have to go out there and you have to use everything."

**David Carter**

Yeah. But, in a sense, print has to do the hard lifting.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. The print has to do all the visibility of it and then some people might buy an e-book.

**David Carter**

So...

**Beverley Cousins**

And you get it slightly cheaper if you buy an e-book. But, usually, the ones that are selling best in e-book are the ones that are selling well in print. And it doesn't seem so far, from what we've seen, e-book sales don't seem to cannibalise the trade paperback sales, which was obviously what everyone was worried about. It doesn't seem to have happened at all. If anything, people might read an e-book and then buy them, the physical...

**David Carter**

Well, I was talking to someone last night who said exactly that. He said, "I go read an e-book and if I like it, I go out and buy the book."



**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, yeah. In the first few years when e-books were really taking off, I would say that books on our top 10, e-books, were mostly my books but that's less now. We've got a few more non-fiction getting in there. But certainly when it started, it was mostly commercial fiction. And now, if you look at Apple, the Apple charts, it's mostly romance because they're cheaper, you know?

**David Carter**

Yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

And it's all – e-books is...

**David Carter**

It's that where people are reading two a week or something like that, it works.

**Beverley Cousins**

And sometimes they're buying it and not even reading it whereas, you know, they buy a whole load, you know, because they're very cheap. E-books, it's all about price. It really is. You can sell a book, a huge amount, for \$4.99 and you put it up to \$9.99, it just stops, or, you know, \$12.99. So it's a kind of different market but I've been lucky. I think commercial fiction has ridden that wave quite well and I think the e-book share has stopped now. It stopped at about 20 per cent.

**David Carter**

It's pretty much plateaued, hasn't it? Yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, it's about 20 per cent and it hasn't...

**David Carter**

Yeah, at 20, yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

I mean, that was just off the top of my head. I can't quote you where that research comes from but...

**David Carter**

I think I've seen 24 per cent or something like that as the figure.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. Certainly for – I mean maybe, maybe in commercial fiction – I could probably find out and let you know – maybe in commercial fiction, it's a bit higher than that, the percent, you know the...

**David Carter**

Yeah, I think the 20 might be overall in the market. I mean, it's...

**Beverley Cousins**

Overall, yeah. Yeah, I think it is. It might be a bit more in certain books, like certain authors, you can be 50/50 but, on the whole, I think 20 is probably the average across the board and it's not growing and the UK, it's not – it's plateaued. So it hasn't taken over in the way that...

**David Carter**

I know in some of the US figures that it's actually fallen over the last couple of years. But, overall, again, I don't know about fiction. It's probably maintained.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, yeah, mmm.

**David Carter**

Just a couple of others before I forget them. Your key, kind of, contact alliances in the field, I mean, you mentioned agents before obviously. Who are you dealing with mainly? What's your network that you work within?

**Beverley Cousins**

Probably it's agents mostly. I mean, I go to – so I get to know as many as I can, particularly the ones that I found do have a sensibility for crime fiction because some you can tell are very literary in their tastes and never have sent me anything that has been for me. So there's a few key ones that I really focus on and keep – get to know. So it's Australian agents, it's rights directors in other territories because I do publish locally books that come from overseas, which – I don't publish that many of them but *Little Coffee Shop of Kabul*,

which was a big one for me was actually an American book but it was called a different name and we republished it here as a different name, a different cover and it was bigger here than it was in the US.

So it was an American book but we published it locally, if that makes sense. So I do get submissions from Random House US, Penguin US, Simon and Schuster US, less so from the UK obviously because they tend to buy rights, Australian rights, so they're not usually splitting rights. So I would say Australian agents, probably US agents and rights directors in the big companies. And then I do go to – I mean, I used to go to the romance writers conventions and I try to, sort of, get involved in things if they want me to do talks at Ned Kelly – you know, the Sisters in Crime, you know, those kinds of things I'll do – haven't done it recently but, you know, I try and do that. And if there's anything like at the Queensland Writers Centre, if they want me to that, I'll do that just to, sort of, get my name out there.

And I've recently, the last few years, every year I've done the Sutherland Writers Festival. They have people doing pitches to you and I haven't bought anyone from there yet but we've come close with a couple where they come and ask your advice. So I'm probably not as networky as Meredith is. Meredith comes from a more – she used to run the Sydney Writers Festival so she's very into that world in which I'm a little bit still outside of. And so she does a lot more, I guess, of networking, going to the festivals and really getting to know writers at the festivals.

### **David Carter**

Yeah. And I can see why that would be the case with them all. You clearly influence things.

### **Beverley Cousins**

I don't really need to do that because a lot of my writers aren't really going to festivals. The ones that they go to are the crime conventions or the romance conventions and things like that, you know?

### **David Carter**

Interesting, yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

I'm very lucky if I get authors at the festivals.

**David Carter**

Yeah, that's interesting, isn't it?

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, mmm.

**David Carter**

Yeah. Just off the top of your head, how many books would you do in a year roughly, sort of, local and then in...

**Beverley Cousins**

Myself, personally, or as a group? As a...

**David Carter**

Personally in the kind of commercial fiction zone.

**Beverley Cousins**

I aim to do 15 new books a year and they'll all have e-books attached to them. And then I'll probably do about five or six second formats for the B format paperback. And there was something else I was thinking I should tell you about and it's just gone out of my head, what I was going to say. But, of course, a lot of those – of the 15, a lot of those will be repeating authors. So, actually, the number of slots I've got for debuts would probably be three. And, in fact, sales will probably tell me don't do more than three because there's a limit to how many they can go out and sell in one – you know, with a big fanfare.

**David Carter**

Yeah. So it mightn't be doing the authors any favour, just take on more...

**Beverley Cousins**

No. Yeah. And as you were saying before about how we published strategically, I mean, it is very strategic. If you take an author on, you're thinking, what's the best month for them? Are there any promotions? Is this going to be a Mother's Day so we'll publish in March, April, May maybe. Is this Father's Day? Okay, so it's going to be that and Big W have Big Book Bonanza promotions twice a year, will we publish it for that? Or it's a debut

writer, there's no way we want to publish them in the last six months of the year. They've got to be in the first six months of the year. January's notoriously quiet. Maybe we'll publish the debut in January because not many people are publishing then so they'll get more – there's more chance of getting space in stores and things like that. So it is very strategic on who the market is and when we can sell the most copies, obviously, and not clashing with other books that we've got on the list. We have to deal with here international books coming in.

You might suddenly find that there's a huge James Patterson coming in which is making it hard for us to get our – you know, the local books because they've got to – suddenly the stores have got a big James Patterson they've got to buy, you know?

### **David Carter**

I could show off my inside knowledge of hearing that Candice Fox and James Patterson...

### **Beverley Cousins**

They are writing a book, yeah. They've got a book coming out in August, yeah. Yes, yeah. But in terms of even just a James Patterson import, I mean, that's actually a local book we've edited and published here. But in terms of his exports – you know, like – or you might have a big Lee Child or you might have suddenly a big book from the UK. We had a drop in. Harper Lee dropped into our list last year, which wasn't expected. The same too with Grey, Christian – you know, E. L. James. We didn't know that 'til two weeks [before] – our sales team suddenly heard from the UK, there's one coming. And it does affect the way the sales team have the budgets that they have to – they're going to make their budgets but is that going to be at the detriment of others.

### **David Carter**

So who makes the decisions about those coming in?

### **Beverley Cousins**

Well, we always import the big ones. I mean, we have a division here who are in correspondence with the UK all the time so they'll know what's coming from the UK. We'll decide whether we – not us but that department will decide how many we'll take. I mean, they might – the UK will say, "Take – you've got to take 5000 copies." And we'll say, "No,

we won't sell them. We'll take 1000", you know? And so we make the decisions on what is brought in but something like a Patterson or a Lee Child or a Danielle Steele, obviously we'll take large numbers. And then, of course, if you know that you can sell X amount of copies of Lee Child, who's going to suffer the debut writer that Big W don't know? Who are they going to pick, you know? So you just have to be strategic. It doesn't mean we don't do them, we just have to make sure we don't clash with something and hope we don't have a drop-in that's going to...

**David Carter**

Yeah. But then there are some of those other books that you – you bring them in but you really do publish them locally rather than just...

**Beverley Cousins**

So, yeah. So we have a US – as I say, rarely a UK one but a US book might come in. I mean, I'd probably do two or three a year. We call them licence titles where we actually don't do the editing, or unlikely to do the editing, but we'll probably buy their files. We'll do our own cover, as we did with *Kabul*. We give it a completely new look and a new title. I'm now publishing, actually, locally publishing, the author of *Kabul* because she – so we actually publish it out here now.

**David Carter**

She should have a relationship with you.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. Even though she's American, we publish her and that's happened here – I think HarperCollins do that, a couple of American authors now as well. So, yeah, some of those licensed titles aren't much easier because we don't have to do as much work but we have to think about them in the same way as how we would publish it for a local market.

**David Carter**

For local. Yeah. That's what I'm interested – yeah, yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

A case in point, I suppose, is one that I did very early on when I got here and I twigged quite early on that rural romance was working and if you had a girl with a cowboy hat on the front cover, it did help. And I had a submission, Rachael Herron, who wrote – she’s a Californian writer and she writes cowboys. I mean, it was about a woman who sets up a knitting shop in the middle of a ranch that she inherits. In America, they were selling it very much as a knitting book because knitting was such a big thing. All I could see was this has got cowboys in it and so we completely redesigned it, gave it a new title, girl in a cowboy hat, cowboy on a horse, sold loads. So, you know, you are kind of thinking of how for America it was the knitting, for us it was the cowboy.

**David Carter**

Yeah. Yeah, that’s a great example.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah.

**David Carter**

So your rights, for the local authors, wouldn’t normally be Australasian?

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. I mean, we do try and get world rights if we can. And then if we don’t sell those world rights, we can then obviously sell, we can now distribute – we can distribute into America and the UK but that’s not ideal. Ideally, we want to sell the rights. But most agents will sell us Oceania, which is, sort of, Australia and its territories. The problem we have, really, isn’t – the boot’s on the other foot for me now because obviously when I was in the UK, you grow up thinking, well, we can have Australian rights. It’s part of a Commonwealth.

**David Carter**

That’s – yep.

**Beverley Cousins**

And you don’t even bat an eyelid because it’s...

**David Carter**

It was almost automatic.

**Beverley Cousins**

Well, it's the tradition. If I had a crime book in the UK, I would come to the equivalent of our international department here and say, "What can you sell?" And you would want them to give you a figure otherwise your costing might not work because you needed Australia. Of course, I come here and I'm horrified at the reverse of it and thinking, "That's just awful. How come?" They just assumed that the UK publishers assume they will get the Commonwealth. And agents too scared to risk not getting a UK deal, that very few of them will split rights in the UK. And here, agents here, are very worried that if they sell the Australian rights separately, they won't get the UK.

**David Carter**

They'll never get the UK deal.

**Beverley Cousins**

So it is a bit of an issue with that as well. And we often buy jointly with the UK to avoid that if it's a big author that a lot of publishers here – say an Australian author – but a lot of publishers here are interested, and we think it could be a big author, we might go to Random UK or Transworld UK or Penguin now in the UK and say, "What do you think?" And hopefully they will join us as a joint acquisition and we can then, sort of, overcome that hurdle.

**David Carter**

Yeah. So the US is a different kettle of fish?

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. I mean, I know that there's some publishers – Pan Macmillan recently bought a book that was US, UK, Australia. They did a global deal. And we would certainly want to do that. It's just hard to coordinate. And we tried to do that recently and it didn't come off just because, in the end, the UK and Australian publishers, me and this other one, had a very clear idea. And the US publisher who was interested had a very different idea of what the books should be about, which is – and we were going to clash if we edited it together.



**David Carter**

Yeah. See, five or six years ago, I interviewed Nerrilee Weir...for a different project. And the thing that I really remember most strongly from that, she said, "You know, look, selling into the US for me is at least as hard as selling translation rights," she said, you know?

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah.

**David Carter**

And that's even selling to Random House in the US. There's no special favours...

**Beverley Cousins**

Well, no. I mean, no. And, you and I know, and this is true...

**David Carter**

...for – I was really surprised.

**Beverley Cousins**

...in the UK as well; you're – trying to sell UK books to the US is hard and so it's even harder for Australian books to get in there. And what American publishers often do is they want to rewrite it for their market, you know? Or they think that their readers won't understand this so they want the author to make these huge amounts of changes. So the sensibility between the UK and Australia is very similar. The US can be quite different in their tastes, in their covers, in their editing styles. So I don't flood the market here with American books but when there's occasional ones that I think would really work...

**David Carter**

Really work, yes.

**Beverley Cousins**

... you know, we'll publish locally.

**David Carter**

Yeah. Just to finish off, the future. What do you think the future looks like?

**Beverley Cousins**

God, that's a big question. Well, we'll find out after the parallel importation ruling happens. Look, I think it's going to – I think I'm pleased to be in the biggest company now. I think that's a good thing. And I think what has been really good for us, we had our big CEO, Markus Dohle, who – he came out just a couple of weeks ago and really, really told us how the creative side is still important. We're a massive company but we are this boutique – we have to be boutique in every country. He very much stressed that.

**David Carter**

Yeah, I've got him in a quote saying...

**Beverley Cousins**

He's very strong on it...

**David Carter**

...that it's interesting – yep.

**Beverley Cousins**

...and feels that we make money in order to invest in authors in our local markets. And I know that sounds like I'm indoctrinated but it actually – the way he tells it, I actually believe it is true.

**David Carter**

It makes sense of your daily practice.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, yeah. And the support that we get in some areas where, you know, you could say don't take a risk on that author but we get support to do it. I think the market will be tough. It's been tough for the last few years and I don't think it's going to get any easier but I think there will be local – you know, they will – local publishing will continue. It might shrink a bit, particularly if parallel importation restrictions are lifted, but I'm fairly positive, you know? I think we'll always have Australian publishing strong, it's just finding a way to balance it with what could be more distribution.

**David Carter**

So some of the challenges might come more through distribution and book selling rather than actual publishing.

**Beverley Cousins**

And I think that'll be harder for the smaller companies, you know? I think the bigger companies – there are risks in having big companies, as we've seen with, you know, Dick Smith, but I think we're a little bit more protected than the smaller ones that very much rely on their income from their local authors. And agents are struggling because it's harder to sell books now just because the lists are shrinking, the advances are shrinking so agents aren't making as much money for themselves so they're not finding it easy to continue, which might be another reason why a lot more are going into the commercial genre areas now because they need to make more money. They need to make their 15 per cent. So I think it's going to be maybe harder for debut authors but hopefully we'll still be there supporting them, you know?

**David Carter**

Are advances going up or going down or staying...

**Beverley Cousins**

I think they're probably going down.

**David Carter**

Yeah. We haven't seen much of the – I mean, one of the analyses that came out of the US and UK was, I think, in the '90s or early 2000s, a big boom in advances, at least for the top gang of authors.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, I think you will find that publishers across the board – it's not just Penguin Random House, I think across the board from what I know from friends – are tightening their belts. Because there are so few books – because we're all looking for that one book that's going to take off like *Narrow Road* or *Light Between Oceans* or something which is going to just take off and be big, when something comes along, it's all a bit emperor's new clothes. We're all going, oh my God, everyone's going for that. And so you get into a bit of a panic. It's going to be the book, that's the book. Usually, it's not the book but it's the one that you didn't notice on your list that suddenly takes off. But everyone goes for it and then

silly money can happen. So some of those authors, very few but a small amount, will benefit from that publisher panic, you know? And they'll be paid far more than probably the book is worth and what we'll suffer is the low-end because they will be seeing less money.

**David Carter**

That's a really good way to put it. I mean, that really makes sense, that way of putting it, I think, yeah.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah. But I think that might happen less and less. I think every publisher is looking at their profit now and will be thinking the areas that we need to stop overspending is in advances. And at the moment, I know there's one publisher who are trying to build their list so they have no choice but to overspend in order to poach or to just – to get that author in that auction. And that's a strategy that they all have. And so their advances are quite high at the moment. We always know if we get beaten, it's probably them. If we get beaten on money numbers [laughs]. But that can't last. I mean, they're going to have to then – the profits are going to have to – and if the profits aren't there, their advances will come down.

**David Carter**

It's a high-risk strategy.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, yeah. Understandable. It's an understandable strategy but it won't last forever. And then, you know, you've got other companies that have done so well with their colouring in books that they can afford to invest a bit more so, yeah.

**David Carter**

Did the merger make any difference to your daily life?

**Beverley Cousins**

No. I mean, it's only really started to really take an effect in the last six months when we've really – they've been slowly going through each department and a lot of – when it first happened, it was on the back-end. It was IT, it was finance and warehouse and they've been merging all those departments. Slowly, it comes more to the publishing side. But

the only difference that's happened is that Nikki Christer is now publishing director of Penguin and Random House. But as far as our day-to-day, it's exactly the same.

**David Carter**

You're making the same kinds of decisions for the same kind of reasons.

**Beverley Cousins**

Yeah, I publish for Random House and Ali and Ben, they all publish for Penguin. So sometimes we go up against each other. Sometimes we say, okay, you know, you go for it or sometimes we both go for it. And either the agent or Nikki has to decide if it comes down to just the two of us, they'll decide which one they want to go with. So we are kind of friends and rivals at the same times. We share a lot of information now that we didn't do before, which is great. And we've really just recently – I know a lot of the Penguin people because I had that year in Melbourne so I know a lot of them.

**David Carter**

Yeah, of course.

**Beverley Cousins**

But some are people here because they're based in Melbourne and we're in Sydney, they didn't know them so there's a lot more interaction now with our editors and our publishers and getting to know each other and working together while still being rivals at the same time, yeah.

**David Carter**

Yeah. Thank you very much. That's been terrific.

**END**