



# Bookworm

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY OF EDITORS (WA) INC.

May 2008

## From the Chair

That's it, as far as I'm concerned. Technology can now go and have a cup of tea and a look out the window, for it has reached the pinnacle of achievement and nothing else needs to be done. It now enables me to have various feeds sent right to my inbox on my favourite topics. The only downside to this is that I don't find as many new sites to watch as I'm not aimlessly following links to see where they take me.

Then again, as some of them are actually things I would definitely be better off never subjecting my innocent eyes to, that's not altogether a bad thing.

Before you think I spend all my time keeping myself up to date on the latest sightings of Bigfoot (it was Texas) and what Le Chupacabra is doing lately (being photographed badly), there are quite a few language sites out there that are warming the cockles of this editor's heart; people beyond editors really care about language! They love it as some love their Lego re-enactments of Star Wars.

Not *me*, of course. Ahem.

This morning, scrolling back through the archives of one of my pet blogs, these worlds collided. Sadly, it wasn't that someone had made a video of Lego Yoda wielding a red pen; I was faced with the horror that I may have more in common with Bigfoot than issues in finding shoes. A comment down near the bottom of one post struck me like a light sabre across the face:

*'The great thing is that you seldom need to sic the grammar police on anyone  
– you just need them to fear the grammar police.'*

Is this what we are? Some sort of conversational bogeyman that people call up to strike fear into inarticulate souls? I hope not. I hope he was talking about some other group of people, possibly those who are really good at cryptic crosswords, but I fear he meant editors.

And the people who write dictionaries.

But why? Surely we are here to help, not harangue. The problem may be that although *we* know that, the great unwashed out there don't. Maybe our image is a group of fussy pedantics, working in close collaboration with the other cultural

bogeyman *the PC Police*, to make life difficult for the beloved (but equally fictional) Aussie Battler.

If that's the case, we need a serious image overhaul. I may work from home, sometimes in pyjama pants, but I like to think of myself as a debonair, finger-on-the-pulse type.

I also like to think of myself as a pirate, but that's only if I go to Fremantle.

Obviously, it's not my sartorial choices dashing any chance of debonair-iness ... it's my *job*.

But how do we change this? I won't give up my affection for language, or my belief that eloquence can be found beyond pleas for clemency. I know that I can't make everyone think the same way as me – believe me, I've tried – so it's not going to be enough to merely hope that one day people will see the light at the end of the em dash. For now, I'll settle for the acceptance kindly offered to so many other sub-groups by the Battler, and wait for the day that I overhear:

'I don't have anything against editors – some of my best friends are editors ... '

*Emma Pearmain*

Forthcoming meeting

*May: Manuscript assessment*

**Date:** Tuesday 6 May 2008

**Time:** 7.30 pm

**Venue:** CWA House, Boardroom (3rd Floor)

1174 Hay Street, West Perth

Parking at rear of building; enter via door from car park

**Cost:** \$2 members, \$5 non-members

**RSVP:** to <[emma007@amnet.net.au](mailto:emma007@amnet.net.au)>

Janet Blagg will be leading discussion on issues of providing manuscript assessments to the public. In particular she will discuss the intersection of advising on the quality of writing (micro and macro) and advising on the publishing market. The session should help anyone who attends to provide more appropriate assessments – and to know when they are not qualified to assess.

Come along to discuss pitfalls, responsibilities, expectations, the level of expertise necessary, and more!

## Report on April 2008 meeting

### *How the hell do I use Word O??*

April's meeting was all about using Microsoft Word. Our host, Polly Evans, fielded some tricky questions and showed us how to make the most of Word in editing. She dispelled some confusion and gave us new ways to save time. She explained the basics of macros, templates, and tracking changes. She also showed how mark-ups work. One little Word trick was to hold down the control button while moving through a document, it makes the cursor skip either a whole word or a whole paragraph instead of just one space at a time. Another was that pressing shift and F5 takes you straight to the last place you edited, so you don't have to go through and re-read the whole thing to find that spot you just changed!

There are two versions of the information sheet available – the shorter of which is fourteen pages. It covers limiting spell-checking, converting pdf documents, picking up in the last document edited, and much more. *Polly is happy to email this (or the more in-depth version) to anyone who asks, her email is <[pollyevans@inet.net.au](mailto:pollyevans@inet.net.au)>.*

***Claire Gaunt***

## Editor's corner – National news

Do I have the job for you!

We need a volunteer to read through the newsletters of the other Societies of Editors each month – and simply notify me of any articles that may be of interest to SOEWA. A few newsletters are posted to us and others arrive by email. (I organise the permissions requests – all you need to do is indicate the articles of interest.) It's a great way to keep up with what's happening in editing around Australia! If you are interested, please email me: <[rebecca.m.newman@gmail.com](mailto:rebecca.m.newman@gmail.com)>.

***Rebecca Newman***

### Dr Carmen Lawrence: 'Notes from the launch of *Take charge!* by James Hansen'

*[By popular demand, we include the notes from the speech that Dr Carmen Lawrence gave when launching James Hansen's book. Many thanks to Dr Lawrence for providing her notes for Bookworm's readers.]*

It's a pleasure to be here to launch James Hansen's helpful guide to using apostrophes and plurals correctly. I know that for those here tonight, errors in punctuation and grammar provoke a visceral response – as they should.

Lynne Truss put it beautifully: 'For any true stickler, you see, the sight of the word "Book's" with an apostrophe in it will trigger a ghastly private emotional process similar to the stages of bereavement, though greatly accelerated.'

And I know you're all professional sticklers, not Truss's 'unattractive, know-all obsessives who get things out of perspective and are in continual peril of being disowned by (their) exasperated families.'

I hesitate to prescribe another – I hasten to add – complementary remedy for the decline in general writing skills noted by many editors, including James. I know that you often have to correct writers' spelling and grammatical errors and that you are further frustrated by the fact that your explanations for the corrections are simply not understood.

We've all speculated that the apparent decline in literacy is the result of too much TV and the ubiquity of the internet, too many mobile phones pressed too often to impressionable ears and simian thumbs broadcasting attenuated instant text messages; teachers have also come in for some bad press too – although it's usually unjustified. It's fair to say that the written word is simply not valued as it once was.

My humble suggestion is that when you encounter someone who appears to have little grasp of the rudiments of language, tell them – politely – to go away and read and read and read; preferably well written literature – and to read with attention. Then read James' book for confirmation and an understanding of the rules. Perhaps a dip into Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, and a bit of Lynne Truss and Don Watson wouldn't go astray either.

In truth, it's hard to imagine how anyone who really enjoys reading – and pays attention – could fail to note how it is done.

There may be excuses for the sign writers who insist on putting apostrophes before every 's' in the vain hope that they are creating a plural. But it's truly staggering that those who aspire to be writers haven't noticed what's needed to convey meaning accurately – and subtly.

To the extent that I'm able to place apostrophes correctly, construct plurals correctly and to avoid management speak, it is because I read, and not just the backs of Weeties packets, although I have been known to do that too.

In fact, like many of you, I'm sure, I suffer from what Patrick White called 'The Reading Sickness': 'soon in a fever – while not understanding half of what I read – but reading and reading.'<sup>i</sup>

White's description of reading as a sickness might, on first hearing, seem an odd way for him to describe an activity he so clearly valued – and one on which his success as a writer ultimately depended.

Given his propensity for mocking the Establishment, it may be that he meant us to infer that reading, as a disease, could 'infect' people to see and act differently, even strangely; so that, like lepers, they stood outside the boundaries of society.

It may be that it is this unsettling characteristic of reading – the fever – which stops Australians reading literature; they prefer being relaxed and comfortable to burning up.

I know that the proliferation of writers' festivals and book clubs has led some to conclude that literature now enjoys a secure place in our lives. But there are worrying signs that this is an overly favourable assessment.

While we appear to be reading as many books as ever, more of them appear to be formulaic fiction or how-to guides for managing our real estate, our children, our physical appearance and our relationships – in no particular order and with little discernible difference in style (or sometimes in content) between them. And all too often they are appallingly badly written.

As Jeremy Fisher suggested in his review of publishing practice for the Australian Society of Authors, 'the creation of a new writer is a slow process that does not fit well with publishers' desires for immediate profits'.<sup>ii</sup>

Or perhaps it is that there are not nearly enough readers capable of reading books properly or as Ivor Indyk says, 'It's not just that publishers have lost the will. Readers have lost the will too.'

Philip Roth warned, in response to even more drastic declines in readership for literary fiction in the U.S., that the danger for all novels and novelists is that there soon may be no audience left.

'I don't think there's a decline of the novel', he said in an interview, 'so much as the decline of the readership. There's been a drastic decline, even a disappearance, of a serious readership. That's inescapable. We can't fail to see it. It's also inescapable, given the pressures in the society. That's a tragedy. By readers, I don't mean people who pick up a book, once in a while. By readers, I mean people who when they are at work during the day think that after dinner tonight and after the kids are in bed, I'm going to read for two hours. That's what I mean. These people do it three or four nights a week for two and half, three hours, and while they do it they don't watch television or answer the phone.'

'Whether it is a matter of television, mass culture or shifts in the way people work and live', Roth said, 'there is a change in the mental landscape having to do with concentration, and that is what's responsible for the declining readership ... For me, concentration is a pleasure, but it's no longer thought of that way by most people.'

'It's what I have instead of religion,' he said. 'Some people believe in God, and I believe in the reader. But I don't want my faith tested too strongly.'

Since he gave this interview in the early 1990s, US readership has plummeted. His faith has been severely tested.

Are Australian readers – and your writers – similarly lacking in concentration span; afflicted with another illness, the inability to do the work of imagination, to expend the necessary time and energy to transform the words on the page into a created world? Perhaps we're suffering from an epidemic of Omega 3 deficiency or a surfeit of Red Dye 2 in our diets.

Is it that the immediacy of the visual world of TV and DVDs and video games corrodes our capacity – and our desire – to be partners with writers in an imagined universe?

Are we so fatigued that we prefer instant satisfaction, slouched on the couch, choosing a product that comes fully assembled, requiring little or no effort and only limited interaction in the space between reader and writer?

Or it may be that reading per se is less valued than it once was or that it has never been much valued – many Australians are uncomfortable with the exercise of the mind and even suspicious of arty types.

Certainly there are plenty of truly awful models for writers – in politics, in management speak and in our newspapers everyday. We hear examples such as this one from Alexander Downer [in November 2007, discussing the election with the ABC's Tony Jones]:

*Well, what we do know is that we have a very strong team. I mean that is what we do know. We know who the team is. Our ministers are well known. They are well known as administrators if you like, they are well known as administrators, they are well known as ministers, they are well known as politicians, they are well known for the policies they pursue.*

James Hansen says modestly that the reason he can write clearly is because he belongs to a generation which, through sheer luck, obtained its schooling before the advent of television, photocopiers, computers, mobile phones and teaching fads, and so learned to listen, to understand sentence structure, to summarise, and to write clear English at speed in longhand. I bet he read a lot too.

He has helpfully put that knowledge to generous use in *Take charge!* which he says he wrote 'because I felt that I should try to do something practical to help today's students.'

We all thank you for that James and I have much pleasure in launching your book.

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<sup>i</sup> P White, 'The Reading Sickness', *Patrick White Speaks*, Primavera, Sydney, 1989.

<sup>ii</sup> J Fisher, *Current Publishing Practice: An Australian Report*, Australian Society of Authors, Sydney, 2005.

### Book review:

*Take charge! Using apostrophes and plurals correctly*  
by James Hansen

This book does just what its cover promises. It is 'an easy, friendly guide', and rather useful too.

Having had a recent education where Home Ecc, Phys Ed and Art were as important as the core subjects, my 'rithmetic and 'riting (well, spelling and grammar) skills are sadly lacking. I believe that the only reason I can look at real editors with a straight face is because I have read so much, and picked up the general gist of the rules of grammar by osmosis. Having a small book with the

words 'friendly guide' (not intimidating), is a very welcome addition to my shelves.

*Take charge!* focuses on the correct use of apostrophes and plurals, with clear and easily understood and remembered explanations for when and how to use them. There are lots of examples for each variation, which is great. I hate books where they give you one or two simple examples, and don't show you the tough ones. James covers both. For the particularly studious, there are exercises (and answers) to ensure your understanding.

It is written in a relaxed style, which helps the subject sound interesting. I had no problems reading it through in one sitting, although I doubt I've remembered as much as I'd like to think I have. James has covered this problem in the detailed table of contents, so it's a breeze to refresh one's mind.

For readers of *Bookworm*, James is offering a special deal on *Take charge!* The first copy will cost \$12, and subsequent copies are \$11 each, including postage. This is a great opportunity to get your hands on one for you and for your illiterate friends and colleagues before they appear in bookshops. Contact James by email <[jehansen@westnet.com.au](mailto:jehansen@westnet.com.au)> to take advantage of this special deal.

### *Polly Delany*

You do it!

I SHOULD have known better. Suggest an idea to Emma Pearmain and it will zoom back at you like Maria Sharapova's forehead. No shriek, just the message: 'OK. You do it.'

I had seen a global email from Piers Kelly in Port Hedland, endorsing the need for a 'FAQ' section on our new website, but also revealing that on a website of his own he planned to have 'Top Ten Reasons Why *Everyone* Needs An Editor.'

In a global email I said 'what a good idea' and quoted three 'reasons' Piers had mentioned: all the best writers use editors; save money; save time. Others, I thought, could be: saving face; saving space (I *have* cut texts by a third); authors tend to miss errors in text they are familiar with; understanding printing technology and being aware of relevant laws.

Back came Pearmain/Sharapova: 'It would be fantastic if you could take care of this.' Clearly, my offensive lob needs work. I was, as it were, marooned at the Net.

In fact, compiling a list of 10 'reasons' proved an interesting and rewarding experience. It made me think in a different way about the work I do, I was helped to do it by other SOEWA members and I should also here acknowledge that the website of the Tasmanian society provided excellent input. Have a look at it:

<http://www.tas-editors.org.au/whydoyouneedaneditor.html>

The seven SOEWA people who responded to my appeals for input (I made three in two weeks) were Piers Kelly, James Hansen, Michèle Drouart, Rebecca Newman, Jan Knight, Cheyenne Martin and Katie Lennerts. The rest of you should be ashamed at your indolence or indifference, or both.

James told me, in support of the statement that all great writers use and appreciate editors: 'Ernest Hemingway once flattened his editor, but didn't fire him.'

From my own research, I knew that Peter Carey has heaped praise on his American editor, the legendary Gary Fisketjon. Editor-at-large at Knopf, (a division of Random House), Fisketjon edits or has edited Tobias Wolff, Julian Barnes, Jeanette Winterson, Graham Swift, Gore Vidal, Bret Easton Ellis, Donna Tartt and the late Raymond Carver as well as Peter Carey.

Carey wrote of his work on *True History of the Kelly Gang*: 'I laboured for four exhilarating weeks in collaboration with Gary Fisketjon, whose green spiderweb annotations ... sometimes precipitated a storm of silent debate but always, day after day, page after page, resulted in a tighter, truer, better book.'

Jan, who has been there, done that, emphasised the importance of meeting deadlines. Katie said: 'You'd always get a professional opinion about house plans or your wedding outfit – do you want your manuscript to be attractive and user-friendly or *to have a permanent bad hair day?*' Nice description, that. I have handled scripts with advanced alopecia, haven't you?

The final 10 (which you can see on our new, green, carbon-neutral website) drew on all the stuff people sent me, though not necessarily in their exact words. I'm grateful for the help.

We all know that the world needs us; let's hope we can persuade it to understand that, too.

*Tom Jenkins*

Up the Typo Eradication Advancement League!

Thanks to Allan Watson for submitting this entertaining link to TEAL's blog:  
[www.jeffdeck.com/teal/blog/](http://www.jeffdeck.com/teal/blog/)

## 4<sup>th</sup> IPED National Editors Conference

*Getting the message across*  
Adelaide 8-10 October 2009

The Society of Editors (SA) will host the 4th Institute of Professional Editors (IPed) National Editors Conference in Adelaide, 8-10 October 2009.

In the coming months, additional information for conference delegates will be available through regular newsletter updates and on the conference website:

[www.editors-sa.org.au/conference09.html](http://www.editors-sa.org.au/conference09.html)

Or on the IPed website:

<http://www.iped-editors.org/content/conferences>

Start planning your trip to Adelaide, where you can enjoy the fabulous architecture and culture as well as listen, discuss, learn, edit, eat and drink!

**Where:** Adelaide, South Australia

**When:** 8-10 October 2009

**Venue:** Adelaide Festival Centre

**Further information:**

<[SAPresident@editors-sa.org.au](mailto:SAPresident@editors-sa.org.au)>

<http://www.editors-sa.org.au/conference09.html>

## Scriptivism

*[Thanks to Jonathon Owen for granting permission to reprint this article from his blog: [www.arrantpedantry.com](http://www.arrantpedantry.com)]*

The dispute between prescriptivism and descriptivism has sometimes been described as “[a war that never ends](#).” Indeed, it often seems that the two sides are locked in an eternal struggle at polar opposites of the debate, neither willing to yield an inch. The prescriptivists are striving to uphold time-honored standards and defend the language from decay; the descriptivists are trying to overthrow the system and allow linguistic chaos to rein in its place.

But is that really a true picture of the situation?

I have met one or two descriptivists who felt that any English sentence produced by a native speaker should be considered perfectly correct. I’ve also edited enough writing to firmly disagree with that notion. But by and large, the descriptivists I’ve known have not been the anything-goes types that the prescriptivists often make them out to be. They may oppose the grammar nazis, but they are not grammar anarchists or grammar free-love hippies; they’re more along the lines of grammar democrats, in my opinion.

If the argument over grammatical standards really is a war that never ends, as Mark Halpern says, then perhaps the primary impetus that keeps it going is the fact that it is such a poorly defined conflict. Both sides have misrepresented the

other, though from my perspective it seems that it is the descriptivists who are most misunderstood.

And though both sides will often make more moderate, conciliatory statements like “Well, of course there should be *some* sort of standard” or “Well, of course language changes and the rules need to change with it,” I’ve never seen editors and linguists sit down together and figure out just how much they really agree on. I think there are many instances where a prescriptivist might say, “English should be *x*,” and a descriptivist would say, “English is *x*”; that is, they’re agreeing on an aspect of the language, even if they’re approaching it from different angles.

The debate, of course, arises from those areas in which the descriptivist says, “English is *x*,” and the prescriptivist says, “Yeah, but it should be *y*.” But I’ve never gotten a satisfactory answer when I’ve asked, “But *why* should it be *y*?” And this, I think, is where prescriptivism goes astray.

Mark Halpern says, “Arbitrary laws – conventions – are just the ones that need enforcement, not the natural laws. The law of gravity can take care of itself; the law that you go on green and stop on red needs all the help it can get.” Reading this, I can’t help but wonder what sorts of linguistic car accidents or traffic jams would occur if we abandoned all of our arbitrary prescriptions. Does language really need our help, or can it take care of itself, too?

If language does need help – and I think that in areas like spelling and punctuation, it clearly does – how much does it need? How much does the strict separation between *less* and *fewer* contribute to the laudable goal of a standard form of the language? What about the proscription against *they* as an indefinite singular pronoun?

How often do prescriptivist rules really help anyone, and how often do they simply cultivate an air of disdain for those who don’t follow the rules? Mark Halpern says that nobody cares about split infinitives or *ain’t* anymore, but this is far from the truth. I’ve known too many editors and language buffs, read too many internet discussions about linguistic pet peeves to believe that.

Far too often, prescriptions serve not to facilitate the smooth and orderly flow of traffic but to impose regulations on a system that got by just fine for centuries without them. And far too often, prescriptivism serves only to create a class of self-appointed grammar police and to make those who can’t remember the arbitrary conventions self-conscious and insecure about their language.

The truth is this: as long as prescriptivism reigns, there will be an awful lot of arrant pedants in the world. And as long as descriptivists are falling down on the job of educating society about language, prescriptivists will never understand that change is not degeneration and that freedom is not anarchy.

Deadline for June 2008 *Bookworm*:  
Tuesday 20 May 2008

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