

# ***FACT SHEET NO. 9***

## **Getting Published**

### **Short Stories and Poetry**

I have been writing since the late 1960s, most of that time I did not pursue getting published all that seriously but I got a few short stories published by joining reading groups who published their works and sold them to other readings groups.

This is probably the best way to get started if you are a poetry or short story writer because the commercial market is extremely small. In the last few years the FAW produced “Said the Rat” an anthology of the best of those poems read at the Water Rat Readings between the years 2000 and 2002, the Bayside Branch of the FAW produced a similar book “Dancing Shadows” an anthology of readings in that region between 2002 and 2003. Other groups like the Nillumbik Writers’ Cooperative in Eltham produced in September 2005 its anthology entitled “Writing Nillumbik”.

There are many of these groups around Melbourne and I would invite them to tell us of your publications and in our next magazine we’ll list them all and how to make contact for copies of their books or to join their group. I would hope that in the coming years the FAW can sponsor some of these works from other regions within Victoria.

There are a number of publishers who specialise who these kinds of publications who bravely enter the commercial market with these books but they have small print runs of around 200 books or less.

*Below are a number of helpful hints on writing itself that apply equally to short stories and poetry.*

### **Novel Writing**

First thing about novel writing is its hard work and when you have finished the first draft, know that you have at least six more to complete before it is publishable. Your first draft is really to get down the story, the basic dialogue and scene descriptions. Many people get writers block trying to make that first draft their masterpiece – my advice just get the story down, don’t worry about grammar, punctuation or finding that great line – just get it down!

Your second draft can concentrate on tidying it up, looking for inconsistencies in the plot, punctuation, clumsy dialogue, grammar and even round out characters or even merge characters. If you are writing a novel over a long period you can often forget exactly what you said in early chapters unless you keep accurate records and notes of key elements in your story. Clumsy dialogue is best uncovered by reading it out aloud to a friend or even yourself – if you stumble or it doesn’t roll off the tongue go with what your mouth is trying to say not what your head is saying, your dialogue will become more natural.

If you feel you're a failure because you were lousy at school in spelling, grammar and punctuation this does not mean you cannot become a writer. First you must be a good storyteller, then you can go off and do courses to improve your skills in these other areas, your final fall back is you can always get someone to edit. Now I can feel a number of you editors out there cringing and understandably as massive editing tasks are hard work, costly and in many cases uneconomic if you want that work published. The more you do to perfect the work the more attractive that work is to a publisher. But if you have a boring story no one will want to read it no matter how well it is written.

The third draft and thereafter should not be done alone, you must have input from outside, this is the time to present your work to a reading group, for novelists a chapter at a time is best – preferably short chapters. Your other alternative is to join a workshop of about six other novelists and a facilitator. You can then get professional input plus comments from your peers who are also members of your potential audience. You in turn get to comment on their work. Only through this kind of interaction will you grow as a writer.

Point to note: The input received is not gospel, you take away the comments and digest them, see if they work, did the reader misinterpret what you said. Act, experiment, discard and adopt. Then present your amended version for a second round of input.

By the time you reach your fifth draft, it is time to submit it to for manuscript assessment. Here professional editors read it with a view to its commercial value, literary content, storytelling ability, spelling, grammar etc. There is a fee based on the number of words and could cost you up to \$500 for an averaged size novel. Your sixth draft should be the result of your rework based on that input.

Then you are ready to attempt submitting this to publishers or considering self-publication. Either way you need to consider who is your audience. Many of us write because we have something to say or a story we feel needs to be told. But you must ask yourself several questions?

- ❑ Does anyone else care?
- ❑ Who is your audience?
- ❑ Why would anyone want to read your manuscript?
- ❑ They say there are no new stories only new ways of telling them, ask yourself How does it differ from any other of thousands of manuscripts? What makes it stand out from the crowd? If you can't find something chances are neither will the publisher.

Some of these questions can be found by simply searching the shelves of your local bookstore and looking for books of a similar genre or theme. This helps identify potential publishers who deal in that type of book and quote these books in your submission – remember you must sell the book to the publisher they see hundreds of books each year and publish only a dozen.

## **Script or Play Writing**

My experiences are limited to film script writing but I expect that writers who do stage plays would face similar problems and I'd invite any playwright to let us know how their experiences differ.

With film, there are no publishers only filmmakers. Many grants are closed to people with no track record or who lack a production team. So how do you get in? Short answer – its not easy. First step like any kind of writing join a group involved in script writing. The FAW Nillumbik Branch is looking at setting up Script Readings for writers both in a workshop environment but also in engaging actors to perform them as readings to the public. This is already done by a group called 'ScreenPlay' now at ACME Theatre in the Melbourne Federation Square.

This gives your script public exposure and we're looking to involve real film directors and producers in our group – that leaves it up to you to sell your script through the quality of its production.

## **Writing in General**

Whether you are writing scripts, poetry, short stories, novels or anything else, the first rule is to first get it down on paper, then like any artist mould and sculpt that work through numerous draft into the best you can do. This process can be seen by some as a monotonous process but if you view your work as a growing living thing you'll get great pleasure from seeing it blossom.

Always step back and leave it alone for several months between drafts, you will be amazed by the stupid errors you'll pick up if you put it aside for awhile – errors you would not normally see because you're too close.

Then get input through readings groups and honest constructive criticism through workshops, this will give you new insights into your own work. Then seek professional input through an Assessment Agency like the Writers Centre before you go to publishers or film producers. If you don't you will be first on the rejection pile. This is also a good time to submit to writing awards because most entrants will not have followed this procedure and will simply not have the level of quality.

## **That puts you in the lead.**

### **Other keys to success:**

Remember everybody believes they have a best seller buried in their head. Some don't think they have the discipline, the skill, the time or the interest to put that pen to paper. Some have a natural talent but most of us have to take the skill to write that lies dormant in all of us and nurture it through practice, hard work and persistence. It can be a very discouraging business. I knew one writer who proudly wallpapered his lou with rejection slips. It was his trophy room of accomplishments; he worked on the basis that if he persisted someone would eventually accept his work. Most people give up - that narrows down the competition for you who are determined to succeed. Those who succeed ... NEVER GIVE UP!

If you are a true writer, you cannot stop, your next story will be buzzing around in your head demanding expression, it maybe lousy but often it can inspire a better story. I never throw out an idea, a line I like or a scene. When I'm stuck for an idea I plough through this collection of bits and get inspiration, often linking two small ideas to create a big idea ... NEVER THROW OUT AN IDEA!

If you keep writing and developing your skill, you will get better. Remember, you are the last person you should select to proof read your work. You are too close, you will not see the 'bleeding obvious' errors. You have too much invested to stand back. When you do proof read it yourself, step back for a few weeks or months and then take a fresh look you'll wonder how you missed some things. When you attend courses remember these only give you the tools – once you are grounded in the tools of your trade but must hone them – this can only be done by:

- ❑ Continually writing
- ❑ Getting constructive feedback on your work through workshops, mentoring or even friends giving you honest feedback.
- ❑ Join a writing discussion group where writers who feel comfortable with each other discuss each others work – be careful these groups can become stale and self-serving after awhile if new blood is not injected.
- ❑ Have it professionally assessed when your happy – after five drafts.

Successful writers are ... NEVER AFRAID OF CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

### **Where do writers get ideas?**

1. Every day you might get a thought, every dream, no matter how stupid, write it down in a notebook. When you're stuck for a story flip through the notebook – never throw out an idea. You should mentally start linking ideas and something will inspire you. My problem is that after nearly forty years it takes me so long to wade through the ideas book.
2. **Writers Block**: often caused by trying to come up with the right words rather than simply diving into it. If you are a writer who plots it out carefully before you begin then you know where to start – so start, worry about fixing the words later march on and get it down. If you work with only milestones along the way armed with a vague idea of how you get from one milestone to the next – same advise. Start, bungle through and fix it later, let your emotions dictate what you write then have your head do the editing later.

**Self Publishing**: There is nothing wrong with self publishing it does carry with it a stigma as if you couldn't quite cut it with the big guys and that maybe true but not for the reasons they might be thinking. Publishers are looking for big sales like 3 to 5,000 or even double these figures as a start point for any publication. This says nothing about its commercial value in smaller print runs or its artistic value. This is a pure monetary decision.

If you go down this route you must also take off your artistic hat and wear a commercial hat unless you have plenty of money or have plenty of room in your garage to store the unsold copies.

It is a risky enterprise but one you share with authors like Jane Austin, Tolstoy, Mathew Riley, Beatrix Potter, Frank Hardy and the authors of the Lonely Planet guide book series.

Do not allow your vanity to enter the equation, there are plenty of vanity publishers who will lure you in, take your money and dump the books on your doorstep. You must step back and take a cold hard commercial look at what you are producing and why? Who will buy it? Who will distribute it? If you decide to proceed you will need:

- ❑ A budget that you can afford
- ❑ A clearly defined market.
- ❑ A publisher or at least a printer who will produce the book.
- ❑ A distribution plan and distributor to get it into shops, you cannot visit every book shop in Australia, concentrate your efforts on being available to promote your book at bookshops or any other event.
- ❑ Go for a small print run unless you have good reason to believe you can sell more and with digital printing you can go as few as 5 while Offset printing minimum is 500.

Establish what is an economic quantity – 5 digital copies might cost \$50 a copy while 500 offset printed might cost \$10. We will go into the advantages and differences between digital and offset printing as opposed to electronic printing in a future article.

Several books on self-publishing that I've seen but not as yet read on this topic are:

- ❑ “Self Publishing Made Easy” by Dr Evan Mitchell coming out in October.
- ❑ “How to Self Edit” by Dianne Bates (FAW member)

#### **Average Revenue Breakdown:**

7-10% Author

40% Retailer

25% distributor

25% publisher/printer

#### **Beware Vanity Publishers:**

These are the sharks of the industry looking to prey on your vanity. They will:

- ❑ publish anything regardless of standard,
- ❑ offer no advise,
- ❑ provide no distribution network,
- ❑ offer no advances,
- ❑ promote themselves through authors wanted ads
- ❑ charge huge amounts and may not bind all copies.
- ❑ Leave author high and dry with a garage of unsold books.

These differ from Self Publishers who you contract to produce your work who should advise you of what they offer, the dangers you face and refer you to distributors and

other relevant personnel before accepting the contract. In a future article we'll go through the steps of post publication such as registration, obtaining ISBN, marketing of your book.

### **Taking Control**

Sometimes you need to take control, if you believe in the project strongly enough and cannot get published then do it yourself! Don't let their ignorance stop you. Nothing can stop a determined person. If the FAW can assist you in getting there we're here to provide that support.

Philip Rainford  
**President FAW Victoria**