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## Indigenous Book Publishing

Anita Heiss

The growth of an Indigenous publishing industry and literary publishing culture is the result of the pioneering roles of Aboriginal writers who paved the way for the current pool of emerging Indigenous writers. The development of this new Indigenous arts practice has also been fuelled by the increasing need for an authentic Indigenous voice in Australian literature. Although support mechanisms for Indigenous writers have improved and the scope of opportunities has broadened because more publishers are seeking Indigenous authors, opportunities are still limited by existing publishing practices.

There have been concentrated efforts by smaller mainstream publishing houses (UQP, FACP, Currency Press), ad hoc contributions by some of the larger houses, and, finally, the establishment of three Indigenous houses. These three publishers—IAD Press in Alice Springs, Magabala Books in Broome, and Aboriginal Studies Press (ASP) in Canberra—aim to showcase Indigenous writing, fill a void in materials for Indigenous readers, and contribute to scholarship on Indigenous studies, and to the development of Indigenous, and therefore Australian, literature. In accordance with their own in-house philosophies, Indigenous publishing houses in Australia determine the types of books and authors they publish and therefore what is available to the Australian reading audience. The inclusion of Indigenous titles in the lists of mainstream publishers can indicate their commitment to supporting Indigenous writing, or simply their ability to identify and market specific Indigenous titles.

While the diversity of Aboriginal Australia might make it difficult to define a specific 'Aboriginal literature', there is some consensus among Indigenous writers, not only that it must at least be authored by an Indigenous person or persons, but also that there must be something that marks Aboriginal writing stylistically.<sup>1</sup> In terms of book production, a book may also be regarded as Indigenous if it is a collaborative effort, with

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<sup>1</sup> See Anita Heiss, *Dhuuluu Yala – To Talk Straight: Publishing Indigenous Literature*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2003; and Michelle Grossman, ed., *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003.

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Indigenous editorial control and design input. In order to examine the current position of Indigenous publishing in Australia, it is necessary to map briefly the types of publishing companies that are involved and their priorities.

### *Indigenous publishing houses*

Established in 1972 and based in Alice Springs, IAD Press is the publishing arm of the education college of the Institute for Aboriginal Development. The press specialises in language dictionaries, teachers' guides, Aboriginal art and children's books. Their list includes oral histories, poetry, fiction, reference titles (bush food, natural history, etc.), Indigenous history (land rights, Stolen Generations, etc.), and cross-cultural information. Like Magabala Books and Aboriginal Studies Press, IAD Press is governed by a board of management made up of Aboriginal people and comprising senior office-bearers from other Aboriginal organisations in Central Australia.<sup>2</sup>

All books published through IAD are written, edited, illustrated, researched or contributed to by Aboriginal people. In the late 1990s, then manager Simon MacDonald claimed that only Aboriginal authors are published, or there is at least a 50 per cent collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal writers. The IAD list includes poet Marjorie Bil Bil, autobiographer Yami Lester, and historian and novelist Kenny Laughton. IAD Press imprint Jukurrpa Books concentrates on children's stories and novels by Indigenous authors. Together, IAD Press and Jukpurra Books accept manuscripts from Indigenous authors on a regional and national basis, publishing between ten and twelve books per year, with the successful 2007 *Jukpurra Diary* (the eleventh published) achieving the highest sales ever, at more than 7,000 units. The Jukpurra diaries and calendars afford IAD Press the cash flow needed to underpin the expensive, small-run but culturally significant language and culture resources that it produces. Simon MacDonald described the process of finding manuscripts:

We find out about a project that isn't even in written form yet. Someone wants to tell a story or a group want to say something ... *Going for Kalta* came to us as an idea, and it was worked up in the press for 15 months before it actually got to the printers and it had been working up with them [the authors] for 12 months before it got to us. Good books take a long time.

IAD Press has Australia-wide distribution, so the general book buyer is also considered within their marketing strategy and is regarded as part of the press's readership. Macdonald says IAD's distributor also gets books into stores that are not specifically for books, like tourist outlets, where a large proportion of international visitors seek information and products related to Indigenous Australian culture. Such titles would include *Putting in the Colour*, a showcase of the celebrated colours and designs of

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<sup>2</sup> Simon MacDonald, personal interview, 10 September 1999. All other quotes from MacDonald in this chapter are from this source unless otherwise indicated.

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Aboriginal textiles—batiks, prints and hand-painted silks—from the Centre and Top End. The title was compiled by Mary-Lou Nugent for Desart Inc.

Similarly, a book like *Life in Gadigal Country* (published by arts/media organisation Gadigal Information Services), an anthology of writing by Indigenous writers focusing on the social, political, historical and cultural life within the Gadigal boundaries of the city of Sydney, sells well in outlets that attract a tourist clientele.<sup>3</sup> At the time of its release in 2002, *Life in Gadigal Country* sold steadily around Circular Quay at the Sydney Opera House Shop (the site of Bennelong Point), the Museum of Sydney (the site of the First Government House and the burial site of Arabanoo), and the Museum of Contemporary Art (the site of the old government boat sheds that housed Aboriginal people until they were dispossessed of that space and moved out to La Perouse). This title has since been taken up by some Australian cultural studies courses at local universities, although academia was not necessarily the intended market.

Current publisher of IAD Press, Jill Walsh, who replaced Indigenous publisher Josie Douglas in 2005, identifies the relativity of the term 'bestseller' for Indigenous houses, saying:

The term is a relative one. The big guns only use it if thousands have been sold in. For us, for instance, we printed *Western Arrarnta Picture Dictionary* in May 2006 with a small run of 500 like all of its predecessors. Within six months, IAD press had sold 90% of the run—that's a best seller in our terms if educators/community members and service providers value to that extent the language access that such a publication gives. The picture dictionary by the way covers the communities to the west of Alice Springs centred on the community of Hermannsburg (Namatjira country).<sup>4</sup>

Magabala Books was established in 1987 with grants from the Australian Bicentennial Authority's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program and the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre.<sup>5</sup> Within one year, Magabala was recognised on the publishing scene with the release of Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* (1988). Ward's book was launched by the then Prime Minister Bob Hawke, and the initial print run of 5,000 sold out in two months, putting it on Sydney's bestseller list, while publishing rights in the United Kingdom were taken up by Virago.<sup>6</sup>

Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation is based in Broome, Western Australia, and the publishing house takes its name from the Yawuru work for the bush banana,

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<sup>3</sup> *Life in Gadigal Country*, Gadigal Information Services, Sydney, 2002. Gadigal Information Services, an arts/media organisation in Sydney, published *Life in Gadigal Country* as a tribute to the past and current custodians of Gadigal country. The publication also demonstrates the role community-based organisations play in publishing cultural books.

<sup>4</sup> Jill Walsh, email to the author, 28 February 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Rosemary Rule, 'Publishing in Broome', *Editions 1*, no. 1 (August 1989), p.7

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p.6.

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which disperses its seeds over the landscape. In this way Magabala Books spreads the seeds of Indigenous culture far and wide, by providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a contemporary medium in which to express the richness and diversity of their cultures.<sup>7</sup> Magabala publishes children's books, autobiographical and historical works, fiction and poetry. There is a management committee at Magabala made up of respected Aboriginal people with various skills appropriate to the publishing process.

Magabala Books became an independent Aboriginal corporation in March 1990, with the objective of restoring, preserving and maintaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Like IAD Press and the restructured Aboriginal Studies Press, the house has a commitment to publishing books of social, political, historical and cultural relevance to Indigenous communities nationally.<sup>8</sup> Although its priority lies in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, Magabala increasingly publishes manuscripts sourced from throughout Australia.

Because Magabala is one of the largest publishers of children's books by and for Indigenous people, its illustrators are as important as their authors. As former editor at Magabala Rachel Bin Salleh put it: 'A large proportion of our books contain a visual element, and it is through this visual element that many of the books have very firm sales. Where possible we utilise Indigenous illustrators, rather than non-Indigenous ones'.<sup>9</sup> Sam Cook, a former designer at Magabala, noted the importance of design in producing Indigenous titles, saying the integrity of utilising designs, colours, symbols and language in a culturally appropriate manner is paramount.<sup>10</sup>

Established in 1964, ASP could be perceived as having been originally established for whites to publish on Aborigines—that is, as a press for anthropologists, historians and academics—as Oodgeroo was the only Aboriginal person publishing at the time, and her work was poetry. Housed within the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra, ASP is the publishing arm of the institute, and publishes works by author in all fields of Aboriginal studies including art, biography, contemporary studies, education, history, health, housing, land rights, language, physical anthropology, prehistory, psychology, social anthropology, and women's studies. More recently it has also published fiction, poetry, plays and children's literature.

ASP has a set of corporate objectives that include publishing quality works for the purposes of informing and educating its readership about past and present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.<sup>11</sup> By 1999–2000 there were

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<sup>7</sup> *Magabala Books Catalogue*, February 1993.

<sup>8</sup> *Magabala's Publishing Policy*, Magabala Books, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Rachel Bin Salleh, letter to the author, 24 October 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Mann, 'Magabala Books: The Politics of Design', *Artlink* 17, no. 1 (1997), p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> *Annual Report 1996–97*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, p.15.

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more than 100 titles in print and approximately six new titles being published each year.<sup>12</sup> Sandra Phillips, one of only three Indigenous editors ever to be employed full-time in publishing, working at both Magabala Books and UQP, was managing editor at ASP from 2002 to 2003.

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<sup>12</sup> *Aboriginal Studies Press 1999–2000 Catalogue*, p. 3.

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