

First published 2026 by
FREMANTLE PRESS

Fremantle Press Inc. trading as Fremantle Press
PO Box 158, North Fremantle, Western Australia, 6159
fremantlepress.com.au

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Cover images by Ermakova Marina, shutterstock.com

Cover illustration by Priya Wilson

Cover design by Carolyn Brown, tendersigh.com.au

Printed by Everbest Printing Investment Limited, China



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 9781760996161 (paperback)

ISBN 9781760996178 (ebook)



Fremantle Press is supported by the Western Australian State Government through the Department of Creative Industries, Tourism and Sport.

Fremantle Press respectfully acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land where we work in Walyalup.



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A tale
of TWO
PUBLISHING
HOUSES

Linda Martin



FREMANTLE PRESS

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1 – Beginnings

It was in the middle of February, and we all remember what the middle of February in Perth is like. It was amazingly hot, and I was sitting there fairly stunned as everybody else was. The launching was coming up. We knew it was going to be a very nice night, and there was a quite euphoric sense that something had perhaps begun that we were going to – if we worked hard enough and if we had writers as good as the writers in Soundings – we could keep this thing going. And it would be valuable, we thought, to the whole sense of community in Western Australia. Because the thing about that book, and all our books to date, they're entirely produced within Western Australia. And just that in itself is a great plus, I think, and was an edge to our pleasure.

– Teresa (Terry) Owen²

Setting the scene

2016

We sit on blankets under the shade of a large eucalyptus tree, overlooking the city. Cushions are scattered and cotton dresses are carefully arranged to avoid savoury dips and slices. Magpies chatter among the branches, watching, waiting to swoop for food. Someone has brought a bottle of sparkling wine and is pouring it into paper cups. It's 11 am and it is hot. It's not so much that we want the wine, more that we feel we could do with it. There's a lot to catch up on.

We are two book editors, two marketing officers, one business manager and two publishing assistants who recently worked together at a publishing house. For a variety of reasons, each of us is at a crossroads, now working in or looking for new jobs – some still in publishing, some in a different industry altogether. Like a family gathering, we reminisce about good times. We also dissect the bad times.

'So, what do you think you'll do now?' I ask Anne, the other editor. I already miss walking down the wide corridor and slipping into her office for freshly brewed coffee and talk of manuscripts. We had both enjoyed talking language and meaning, while tackling structural problems and reading aloud the work we admired.

'Well, there's a teaching job ...' she says. 'What about you? How's the freelance editing going?'

‘I’m not sure how I feel about it yet,’ I say. ‘I mean, I can work from home and choose my hours, so that’s nice, but sometimes it feels a bit lonely. I miss the team and the collaborative process of working on books. You know – everyone contributing, seeing the work evolve from manuscript to printed book.’

I have worked in the publishing industry for most of my working life. I started as a production coordinator at Fremantle Arts Centre Press (FACP) when I was thirty, back in the 1990s. I’d heard about a job going there when I had been working as general manager for Deck Chair Theatre in Fremantle – a not-for-profit community theatre company. Even though the pay at Fremantle Arts Centre Press was considerably less than what I’d been earning (dropping from \$35,000 to \$29,438 per annum), the publishing industry intrigued me, and I was more passionate about literature than I was about theatre.

Perth was smaller then, and through a contact at the Department of Culture and the Arts (DCA) I was able to find out more about the role of production coordinator, learning that it would involve the scheduling and coordinating of each stage of book production from author manuscript through to editing, design, typesetting, proofreading and printing. I also received the contact number for the publisher at Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Ray Coffey. I phoned him on my push-button landline, introducing myself and my experience, telling him how I was studying literature at Murdoch University, and how I was very interested in the job. He suggested I drop in my CV.

A few days later, I was called in to meet Ray at the FACP office, a converted old redbrick house at 193 South Terrace, Fremantle. Ray – tall, slim, bearded, and friendly-looking – sat behind a big old jarrah desk in front of a row of sash windows. The room was lined with books. The interview went well. I felt relaxed, mostly because Ray made me laugh a lot. He had a warm, compelling

understand my recent publishing experience, and maybe it will direct me to where I go next.’

In the 1970s, the days felt long and summers were endless. Dogs walked off-lead and children walked barefoot. Generous lawns were dotted with trees, Hills hoist clotheslines and, for some lucky ones, above-ground swimming pools. The sun shone on toned limbs as children ran around backyards, challenging the tick-tick-ticking arms of iron sprinklers. Warm evenings brought friends, barbeques and watermelon, kids getting up to mischief while their parents partied. It felt as though the world was perfect. But I was a child, then, and my world was small.

On school nights my family would watch the six o'clock news on a tiny black-and-white television in the asbestos sleepout. I was too young to be interested and, perched at the end of a long divan, would prefer to read a book. What I didn't see was that, nationally, protests against the Vietnam War were intensifying and students were becoming politically active within the universities. I wasn't aware that Australia was finding a new sense of independence and nationalism in the broader social and political context, that liberation movements were campaigning for equal rights for women and for gay men, in addition to equal pay and decriminalisation of homosexuality. A Labor government had come to power in 1972 after twenty-three years in opposition, the same year that protests were held for Indigenous civil rights and land rights when Aboriginal people established a Tent Embassy in front of what is now called Old Parliament House in the nation's capital. In Perth, a consulate tent was put up in Kings Park before being erected on the lawn outside Parliament House.

During that same decade in Perth, I didn't know that Western Australia's Court Liberal government had shown a commitment

to education and the arts through the inauguration of a second university – Murdoch University – whose first students commenced in 1975, the restoration of His Majesty’s Theatre in 1977, the opening of the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1979, and the establishment of the Western Australian Literary Fund in 1974–1975.³

In 1973 I was nine years old, so I didn’t know anything about Australian publishing then, and the only Australian books I’d read were *The Crooked Snake* by Patricia Wrightson, *The Magic Pudding* by Norman Lindsay and the Snugglepot and Cuddlepie series by May Gibbs. I wasn’t aware, either, that things were changing in Australian publishing. I didn’t know that Patrick White won the 1973 Nobel Prize in Literature for ‘an epic and psychological narrative art which has introduced a new continent to literature’;⁴ that Australian publishing houses Angus & Robertson and Rigby had started to compete with the Australian branches of international publishing houses Penguin and Collins; that in the first half of the 1970s, small independent publishing houses McPhee Gribble, Lonely Planet and Outback Press were being established; or that the University of Queensland Press (UQP), established in 1948, had published its first books of Australian poetry in 1970.⁵

I didn’t know that offset printing had replaced letterpress, moving aside the old metal letter castings that had to be ‘stamped’ in the printing process, to make way for plates and rubber blankets that could transfer the image of the page, making book production so much more accessible and cost-effective.⁶ And I didn’t know there had been a time before the 1970s when paperback books weren’t taken very seriously.⁷

I think about my time in publishing now, as a woman fast approaching her sixties – a decade that I am continually surprised to find myself before – wondering where the years went and

noticing how I am beginning to sound like my mother. I deliver lectures in editing, writing and publishing at universities, sharing with students my experience of working in a publishing house in Perth, but I remain fairly uninformed of anything earlier than that.

I would like to go back further, to the beginnings of Fremantle Arts Centre Press, and share others' early experiences of publishing in Western Australia. I'd like to talk about the books that were produced before my time, and find out how editors became editors before courses in editing were available. I'd like to know how the Press began, how it found its early authors, and what influence it had on the literary scene in Western Australia and beyond.

I've read some excellent editing and publishing memoirs and biographies with a focus on publishing during the 1970s – of Craig Munro (UQP), Hilary McPhee (McPhee Gribble), Michael Wilding (Wild & Woolley) and Beatrice Davis (Angus & Robertson) – and each captures wonderful moments of publishing experience in Australia at the time. For example, Hilary McPhee wrote:

When McPhee Gribble began, independent publishers had been starting up around the world in all kinds of fields, small, often radical presses producing everything from polemics to poetry, instructions on how to survive as single women to Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*. There was a climate of optimism and activism, and a belief in books and the power of the printed word to change things. There were enough independent publishers in Australia to have to hire chairs for the inaugural meeting of the Independent Publishers Association ...⁸

And:

This generation of new writers would have once left Australia and many would probably not have come back. After twenty-three years of conservative leadership, the election of the Whitlam government in 1972 felt like a seismic shift, a generational changeover that was long overdue – and was one of the reasons many expatriates gave for returning. The Australia Council's support for writers and artists was another [...] The arts in Australia felt themselves to be valued, and Australia, for once, seemed to the rest of the world to be ahead of the game.⁹

In these books, Fremantle Arts Centre Press is mentioned only in passing, mostly noting the success of *A Fortunate Life* by Albert Facey and *My Place* by Sally Morgan. There are some published essays in journals such as *Westerly* and a strong inclusion in Per Henningsgaard's 2008 PhD thesis,¹⁰ all of which give interesting accounts of early FACP. But I am looking for a conversation. I am hoping for talks with the inaugurate staff of the publishing house and some of its early writers so I can get more of a firsthand sense of the Press's establishing operations, values and relationships. I want to know if there was ever a time when the Western Australian literary scene felt more *seen* by the rest of the nation; and I want to include the story of Fremantle Arts Centre Press in the national publishing record.

Before becoming the Fremantle Arts Centre in 1973, the gothic building at 1 Finnerty Street had endured a complicated past. Colonel Edmund Henderson, comptroller-general of convicts in the Western Australian colony, designed the building to be used