

Productivity Commission

Parallel Importation of Books

a submission from Wendy Harmer.

Dear Members of the Commission:



I appeal to you as the author of three reference works, three novels for adults and twelve books for children.




My books for children in the “Pearlie” series have been translated into eight languages (including Hebrew, Greek, Portuguese, Catalan and Bahasa Indonesian) and have now become the subject of an animated series which is a major(\$10 million plus) co-production between Sticky Pictures (Australia) www.stickypictures.com and Nelvana (Canada) www.Nelvana.com and is slated for world-wide television release later this year.

I am particularly proud of my children’s series - written in the Australian vernacular, featuring uniquely Australian characters and displaying the fine work of Australian illustrators Mike Zarb and Gypsy Taylor. I am thrilled and humbled that this aspect of our culture is being taken to the world.

The “Pearlie” books were in part written by me as a reaction to the mountain of books from the US and the UK

for children in the five to eight year age group. I was keen that my young daughter should have access to stories depicting her culture.

The main character of my books is Pearlie - a fairy who lives in Jubilee Park with possums and lilli pilli trees. Her best friend is an Aboriginal character named  "Opal" who comes from "Rainbow Ridge" and rides a frill necked lizard. They celebrate a hot Christmas day! Fair dinkum!



The success of this series indicates that thousands of Australian parents feel exactly the same as I do – they want their children to experience story telling in their own tradition. For them, this is not about saving a few dollars on books! They are very keen that their children see themselves in their literature and are inspired by their own culture. They want their children to know that there is magic to be found in their own backyards!

The television adaption of the "Pearlie" series has provided employment for a dozen Australian animators, designers and production assistants and has also been a boost for the reputation of the local animation scene. In particular, Sticky Pictures has impressed its international partners with the excellence of local artists and been able to forge links for more co-production projects. The "Pearlie" series was also adapted for stage by the Sydney Theatre Group Monkey Baa and has toured extensively in metropolitan schools and regional Australian theatres. Again, the works provided employment for local actors, designers, directors and musicians.

It should be noted that Nelvana, the hugely successful Canadian animation house, chose “Pearlie” as the subject for their series, (from a myriad international contenders) precisely because she sounded “different”. As script editor of the series, I have been adamant that, although Pearlie speaks with a Canadian accent, the “Opal” character remains true to her outback roots and it *never* snows at Christmas! (The series has sold particularly well in Latin America because of its Southern Hemisphere setting.)



The copyright battles I have encountered with the Disney Channel and their flights of merchandised fairies are too innumerable to mention!


This may seem like small stuff to the local offices of multinational companies and Canberra regulators, however, as a person who still adores and is inspired by May Gibbs’ “Snugglepote and Cuddlepie”- it means the world to me.



I have fought, and fought hard, to retain the “Australianess” of my creation in the face of what I see as the globalisation of childhood experience. (Try finding a “holiday” movie on the Disney Channel *without* snow!)




The proposed changes to importation and copyright legislation present the very real possibility of preventing a similar success story like “Pearlie” - or indeed my beloved “Snugglepote and Cuddlepie” - from ever happening again.

If I had been expected to impress US and UK publishers with the notion of an Aussie fairy character, I would have been dismissed. The mention of “Snugglepote and Cuddlepie” would have likewise been met with blank looks. 

“We have enough fairy stories in the world. What do *Australians* know about fairies... as for *gumnut babies*...” would have been the response.

“Pearlie” would never have had the chance to weave her own particular brand of “Aussie Magic”. And, at the risk of sounding immodest, I believe local kids would have been the poorer for it.

I write this, not in support of myself, but out of concern for future unpublished authors - like my own daughter Maeve, who at the age of nine, has already started to write her fantasy stories and dreams of one day being an author.

If the Australian publishing scene is decimated and relegated to being no more than a “clearing house” for international authors, she will never have the chance to realise that dream. 


Wherever I travel, I meet Australian parents who have aspirations to have their own tales for their children make it into print. They know that they have something to say that’s invaluable to Aussie kids. They understand the power of literature to give a child a sense of place and

belonging.


They have no hope of doing this if our publishing houses are gutted of editors and publicists, cover designers and proof readers and are instead populated by stock takers and bean counters.

Our publishing houses must remain viable - financially strong, proud and respected - in order to have the confidence and ability to mentor local, unknown authors. If they are reduced to merely being “distributors” for US and UK publishing houses, this will not happen.

I must therefore protest, *in the strongest terms*, at the planned removal of protective parallel importation provisions.


It will be a disastrous move for Australian authors, Australian publishers and, most of all, the Australian reading public! 

I believe I am in the position to plead the case for Australia's children:

- Let's take every care our children's stories continue to be written and heard.
- Let's give every Australian child the chance to dream that they can one day take their own experience to the world.
- Let's never forget how our own childhood stories resonate throughout our adult lives and bring us so much pride, joy and understanding of what it is to be Australian. 

Please do not relegate Australian children's culture to the rubbish bin, or should I say, "trash can" !

Finally, if this is Pearlie v. Tinkerbell... Go Pearlie! You good thing!

Hurly Burly! 

It's Wendy Harmer.