

## **Publishing and Australian Literature**

### **Crisis, Decline or Transformation?**

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The golden age of Australian publishing and the promotion of Australian literature, primed by the 1972 Whitlam victory and kept going through the 1980s by the financial largesse associated with the celebration of the 1988 Bicentenary of Australia, is well and truly over.

Elizabeth Webby, 'Australian Literature and the Marketplace'<sup>1</sup>

In the decade since Elizabeth Webby made this observation, the end of the 'golden age' of Australian literature and publishing has been proclaimed many times, and multiple causes of this situation have been identified, including 'declining editing standards, changes in literary taste, the rise of marketing departments in publishing houses, changing leisure patterns, [and] the advent of Nielson BookScan'.<sup>2</sup> Most often and most convincingly, the end of this 'golden age' is attributed to the globalisation, consolidation and economic rationalisation of book publishing. Nathan Hollier's claim that 'Australian literature is dying, or at least disappearing',<sup>3</sup> because 'the Australian publishing industry and market is dominated by a handful of large

corporations, themselves generally parts of massive, multi-national conglomerates',<sup>4</sup> captures the general view. This supposed dominance of Australian publishing by multinational conglomerates is described by some commentators, like Michael Wilding and David Myers, as negative for Australian literature as a whole,<sup>5</sup> and by others, like Webby and Mark Davis, as responsible for a specific decline in Australian literary fiction.<sup>6</sup>

I explore both positions, first investigating trends in Australian novel publication and comparing these to trends in publication of novels from other countries as well as other forms of Australian-originated literature (specifically, poetry and auto/biography). I then consider the case of Australian literary fiction, before looking in detail at Davis's account of the changing output of large publishers of Australian novels. This 'distant reading'<sup>7</sup> of the Australian literary field draws on the comprehensive bibliographic information on Australian literature in the AustLit database.<sup>8</sup> While offering none of the insight into specific texts, authors or publishers provided by case studies, this type of empirical, data-rich analysis is a necessary corrective to those examinations of literature and publishing that identify and describe overall trends based only on particular examples, observations or anecdotes. The results of this study reveal a decline in Australian novel and poetry titles (since 2000 and 1994 respectively), but suggest a more complex picture of this trend than dominant expressions of nostalgia and alarm about the fate of Australian literature and publishing imply.

—AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE AND GLOBALISATION

In accounts of Australian publishing, the 1990s and 2000s are routinely identified as an era of trade deregulation, globalisation and economic rationalism, leading to the rise and ascendancy of multinational conglomerates.<sup>9</sup> Davis describes how 'successive Australian governments have progressively "opened up" the Australian economy to international competition, ending industry assistance schemes, eliminating remaining tariffs and encouraging exports', and identifies a series of related decisions with particular consequences for Australian publishing, including: 'changes to the copyright law to allow the parallel import of books from the United States in 1991, and the axing by the Howard government in 1996 of the Book Bounty ... [t]he introduction in 2000 of GST on all non-food retail products ... [producing] for

the first time, a sales tax on books' and 'low levels of government funding for literature'.<sup>10</sup>

Before turning to Davis's discussion of the effect of these changes on literary fiction, I want to assess the claims of critics like Wilding and Myers, who identify the deregulation and globalisation of publishing as disadvantageous to Australian literature in general. Or, I should say, this is what they explicitly argue. At times, Wilding's and Myers' conflation of Australian literature and culture suggests that literary fiction may be the implicit object of their concern. If this is the case, their portrayal of literary fiction and publishing—'a pocket within commodity culture', as John Frow famously put it<sup>11</sup>—as representative of the entire industry and literary field is a major blind spot in their analyses. To avoid this reductive approach, I will take these critics at their word and begin by exploring trends in all Australian novels, as well as other forms of Australian literature.

Wilding and Myers attribute what they see as a contemporary crisis in Australian literature to the supposed dominance of the publishing industry by multinational conglomerates. As these conglomerates invade and capture the market—publisher after publisher has been 'swallowed by corporate giants',<sup>12</sup> says Wilding—publishing decisions are increasingly decided by corporate values, with profit privileged over Australian literature and publishers by companies that have no allegiance to the nation. As Wilding asserts, with the major part of Australian publishing done by 'the big transnational corporations', 'the shaping of the national culture is in the hands of interests that have no commitment to that culture ... only [to] profit and tax minimisation'.<sup>13</sup> How does 'an independent national culture' survive, he asks, when 'publishing decisions are made ultimately in purely cash terms by the overseas accountants of the transnational conglomerates?'<sup>14</sup>

As well as pursuing profit to the detriment of 'culture', multinational conglomerates are seen to privilege foreign over Australian publications. Wilding argues that the 'local Australian divisions of multinational publishers have a priority of selling the imported product'.<sup>15</sup> Myers voices this same argument in more alarmist terms: 'With globalisation have come huge media conglomerations of multinational publishers who swamp the limited Australian market with seductive and alluring and imposing publications from the USA, the UK and Europe'.<sup>16</sup> According to Wilding, the effects of globalisation are compounded in relation to

Australian literature because publications from the United States and the United Kingdom do not need translation: 'National cultures that have their own distinct language—France, Italy, South Korea—are protected from this imported product'.<sup>17</sup>

Based on these arguments, one would expect to see reduced publication of Australian literature from the mid-1990s. Figure 1 tests this hypothesis in relation to Australian novels, charting the number of titles published from 1990 to 2007. Growth in Australian novel titles through the 1990s encompasses the period from the mid-1990s, generally seen as the beginning of the globalisation and consolidation of book publishing. The inevitable lag between a book contract being signed and that book being published could certainly explain why changing industry dynamics are not reflected by an immediate decline in titles. Given this proviso, the decline in Australian novels since 2000 seems to affirm negative assessments of contemporary industry trends. In terms of the number of titles published, the Australian novel field has declined by approximately 24 per cent from 2000 to 2007. It is easy to imagine an argument that stops at this point: after presenting reasons for a decline in publication of Australian novels, a decline is demonstrated. But a

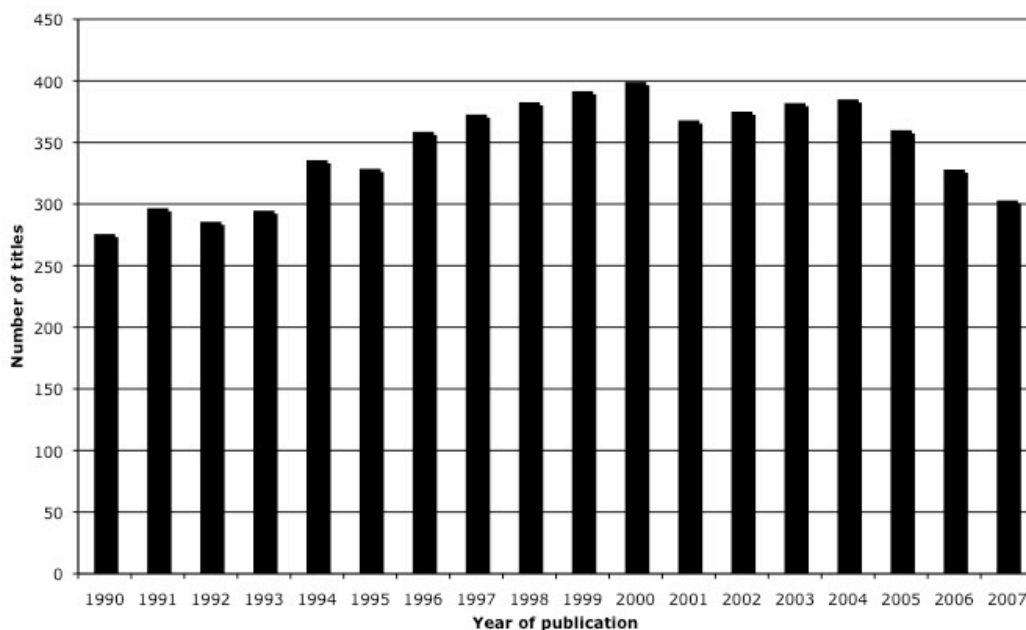


Figure 1: Australian novel titles, 1990–2007

(source: AustLit: The Australian Literature Resource)

correlation in events does not necessarily indicate a causal relationship, making further analysis and exploration necessary to determine whether this decline is because of multinational conglomerates, or if other factors are involved. It is possible to ascertain, for instance, if publication of Australian novels has fallen before the current era. To this end, Figure 2 depicts the number of titles published from 1860 to 2007. From this perspective, the reduced publication of Australian novels in the past seven years is redefined as one of a number of intermittent falls.

Detailed historical analysis is important. However, as Franco Moretti showed in *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, literary and publishing history can also be explored from a distance, to assess the possible existence of trends, or even cycles, operating above or beyond specific events. The analysis that follows draws on Moretti’s work, both employing the speculative, broad-ranging method of ‘distant reading’ he introduces and reflecting on relationships between trends in Australian novel publication and Moretti’s findings regarding other national literatures.<sup>18</sup> A distant reading of the Australian novel field problematises descriptions of the current—or any—decline as a crisis: if the numbers of Australian novels published normally rises and falls, it becomes difficult to sustain the idea that the field is undergoing an unprecedented

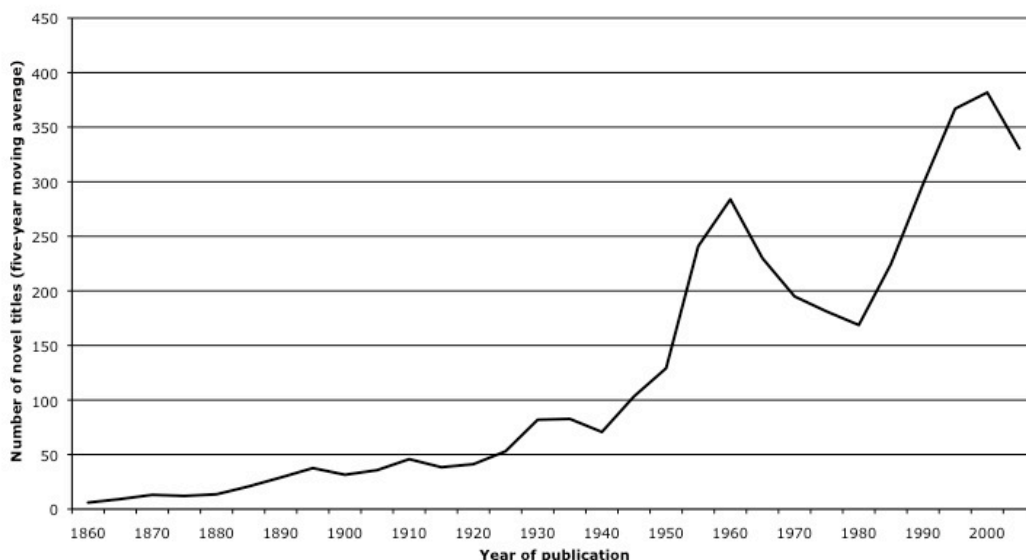


Figure 2: Australian novel titles, 1860–2007

(source: AusLit: The Australian Literature Resource)

crisis. At the same time, this distant reading reveals important ways in which the current decline is different from previous falls.

The undulating pattern of growth in Australian novel publication evident in Figure 2 very closely resembles Moretti's graph of the British novel field from 1710 to 1850.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, many of the reasons Moretti identifies for this pattern in Britain, and in other countries he surveys (including Japan, Italy and France), appear relevant to an interpretation of the Australian data. The three periods of growth in British novel titles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries correspond with what Moretti calls 'genre waves'—regularly interspersed periods when a cluster of genres emerges and, for some reason, captures the popular imagination. The two most recent rises in Australian novels correspond with the popularity of particular genres—westerns and war novels in the 1950s and 1960s, and romance, fantasy and young adult in the 1980s and 1990s. AustLit does not contain reliable information on the genre of novels published before the 1950s, so it is not possible to ascertain from this dataset whether the two previous rises (in the 1890s and 1900s and in the 1920s and 1930s) were also related to the popularity of particular genres.

Also echoed in the Australian data is Moretti's identification of a correlation between socially and politically destabilising events (such as war) and reductions in publication of Japanese, British and Italian novels.<sup>20</sup> Each reduction in the publication of Australian novel titles depicted in Figure 2 coincides with the country's involvement in war: the Boer War, the two world wars, the Vietnam War and the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> I will return shortly to the issue of whether these current wars could possibly account for the recent decline in publication of novel titles. In the meantime, it is notable that if generational shifts are responsible for the emergence and popularity of new 'waves' of genres—as Moretti tentatively proposes—then war would be an important factor in motivating generational change.

A further factor—not considered by Moretti—also correlates with the rises and falls in Australian novels: the country's economic situation. Given that the novel is a commodity in the wider market, such a correlation is hardly unexpected. But rather than a decline in novels in economically difficult times, publication has increased during the three periods in which the Australian economy has been in depression or recession: the 1890s, the early 1930s, and the late 1980s to the early

1990s. These correlations raise the possibility that novels become less important in times of economic prosperity (such as Australia has experienced over the decade to 2008) and more important in times of economic crisis. It remains to be seen if the 'global financial crisis' of the late 2000s has created another rise in the Australian novel field.

These correlations between political, social and economic phenomenon and novel publication—both in Australia and in other countries—is remarkable, especially for a discipline (and here I'm speaking of literary studies) where a focus on the individual and unique case, rather than on trends and patterns, is the norm. Such patterns imply a significant relationship between factors external to the publishing industry and the operation of that industry. This seems obvious, but at present, internal factors—such as 'declining editing standards ... the rise of marketing departments'<sup>22</sup> and the like—are almost inevitably identified as the root cause of any publishing industry shifts. The centrality of genre fiction to the rise and fall of Australian novels is also significant. Most critical discussion of the history, or current state, of Australian publishing focuses—explicitly or implicitly—on literary fiction. The emergence of genre fiction as a dominant force in Australian literature and publishing exposes the selective and restricted focus of such discussion.

While a distant reading of the Australian novel field offers a new perspective, there is the danger that this approach underestimates the impact of specific historical, cultural and economic events or conditions on publishing. This comparison of Australian and British novel trends risks occluding profound differences between the two countries and historical periods, most particularly, the differing exposure of publishers to international competition. While eighteenth-century British publishers were relatively protected,<sup>23</sup> this is not true of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australian publishers. In fact, until well into the twentieth century, the Traditional Market Agreement gave British publishers considerable influence over the Australian book market.<sup>24</sup> As a consequence of this agreement, Australia was the largest export market for British books until at least the mid-twentieth century,<sup>25</sup> and 'Australia's book trade and readers were ... part of an imperial cultural space, dominated and defended by London publishers, and shared with Canadian, South Africans, Indians, New Zealanders and other readers of the Empire'.<sup>26</sup>

Considering the history of Australian novel publication in the light of Australia's relationship with Britain foregrounds similarities in descriptions of this 'imperial cultural space' and the current era of multinational publishing. In terms that resonate with Wilding's concern that foreign publishers privilege imported books,<sup>27</sup> and Myer's claim that publications from the USA, UK and Europe are more 'seductive and alluring and imposing' than the local product,<sup>28</sup> Webby notes that, 'From early on, writers complained of ... Australian readers' prejudice against local productions'.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, where Wilding and Myers fear that multinational conglomerates have flooded or swamped the local market, Webby and Tim Dolin note that the cheapness of imported British fiction in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was one of the main reasons 'Australian writers, publishers, and readers found it all the more difficult to establish, develop and support a national literary culture'.<sup>30</sup>

In some ways, this resonance in description merely emphasises the markedly different consequences of British domination and multinational conglomeration. Where the 'privileged access to the Australian market' enjoyed by British publishers until the mid-twentieth century strongly 'restricted local book culture',<sup>31</sup> in the current era, local publishing has grown: 'The market share of Australian-originated books has increased to the point where they now hold 60 per cent of the market (compared to less than 10 per cent of music and 5 per cent of films)'.<sup>32</sup>

But this resonance also highlights that the two most significant periods of growth in Australian novel publishing occurred when the local industry was protected. Much of the first major growth—in Australian westerns and war novels from the 1940s to the 1960s—occurred because of import tariffs on American pulp fiction from 1939 to 1959. As Toni Johnson-Woods argues, the protection these tariffs offered allowed local pulp fiction publishers to prosper.<sup>33</sup> The market niche they established during these decades allowed Australian pulp fiction publishers to continue dominating Australian novel publication for at least a decade after tariffs were lifted.<sup>34</sup> While literary scholars seldom acknowledge this first era of protection—as its effects were entirely constituted by genre fiction—they frequently celebrate a second protectionist period, produced by cultural nationalist funding for Australian literature and publishing from the late 1960s to the early



1990s.<sup>35</sup> Government funding is routinely identified as responsible for the expansion of Australian novel publishing in the 1980s and early 1990s. As a significant proportion of such growth was due not only to genre fiction but to a multinational publishing conglomerate (Torstar, owner of Harlequin Mills & Boon, published the most Australian novel titles of any publisher in the 1980s and 1990s),<sup>36</sup> the extent of the impact of this funding has almost certainly been overstated. Nevertheless, the correspondence between these two eras of protectionism and the two periods of significant growth in the number of Australian novel titles raises the possibility that the relatively high number of titles published in the second half of the twentieth century might only be possible under protectionist conditions. Correlatively, although multinational expansion has had less effect on local publishers than British imperialism, the current decline in publication of Australian novels might be the inevitable consequence of the return to a globally competitive environment.

—BEYOND THE NOVEL: POETRY, READERS AND AUTO/BIOGRAPHY

Novel publication is commonly taken as indicative of trends in Australian literature as a whole.<sup>37</sup> But literature encompasses a far broader range of written works, from poetry and drama to autobiography, biography and criticism. Considering a broad range of literature produces a more accurate picture of the state of the publishing industry. Concurrently, trends in these other forms can be used to contextualise, and interpret, trends in novel publication. As I noted previously, the consistent correlation between Australia's involvement in war and declines in publication of novels is significant; but the idea of a causal relationship between war in Iraq and Afghanistan and a decline in Australian novels is difficult to accept. It seems plausible that World War II, for instance, would have affected novel publication: as well as the deaths of many potential authors, this war created enormous disruptions in trade and shortages in materials essential to writing and publishing, including paper. In contrast, it seems unlikely that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have a comparable effect. Comparing Australian novel and poetry titles supports the existence of a causal relationship between war and past declines in Australian novels. But this comparison also suggests that a significant change has occurred, which supersedes previous patterns and relationships and renders the current decline in Australian novels notably different from previous falls.

Figure 3 compares the publication of Australian novels and poetry titles. For the purposes of comparison, I have only considered poetry written by a single author or a very small number of authors and published in a collection: that is, poetry published as a book.<sup>38</sup> This graph reveals a marked, though changing, association between rises and falls in the publication of Australian novels and poetry collections. These fields followed a relatively similar shape until 1915, when publication of Australian poetry and novels begins to occur inversely (with the number of novels declining as the number of poetry collections increase, and vice versa). That changes in both fields correspond with Australia's involvement in war reinforces the idea that publishing is influenced by political and social upheaval. But instead of having a detrimental effect on literature *per se*, war appears conducive to publication of Australian poetry. The longstanding inverse relationship between novel and poetry publication is replaced in the 1980s by the parallel growth of both fields. As I argued previously, literary scholars have probably overstated the impact of cultural nationalist funding, from the late 1960s, on the Australian novel field as a whole. In contrast, given that such funding is allocated to 'high culture' forms of literature, increased government funding probably contributed significantly to growth in Australian poetry collections from the late 1960s to the early 1990s.

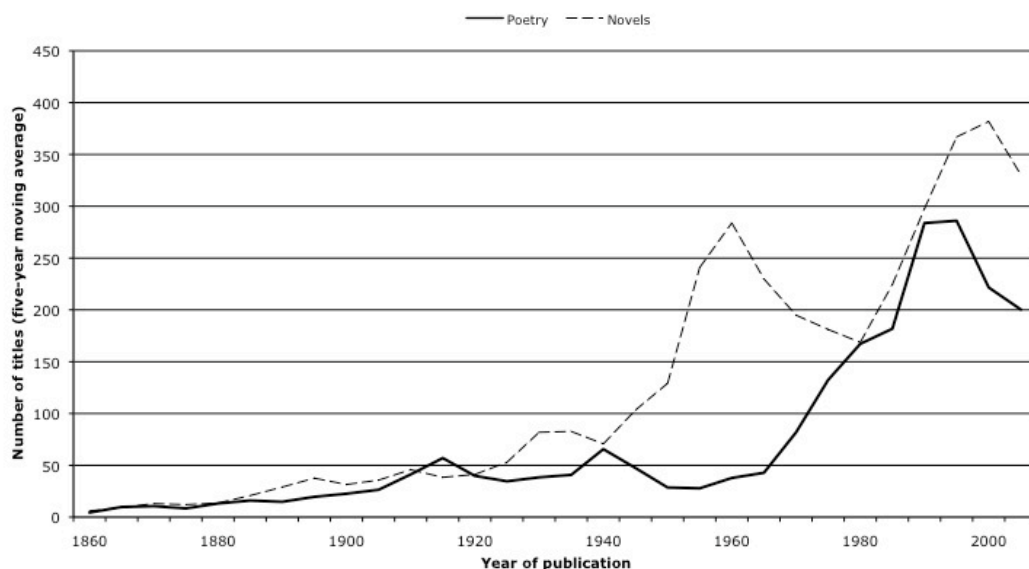


Figure 3: Australian poetry and novel titles, 1860–2007  
(source: AustLit: The Australian Literature Resource)

Following this period of parallel growth, a reduction in poetry titles from 1994 foreshadows the decline in Australian novels from 2000.

Poetry and literary fiction are generally categorised together, in opposition to genre fiction. While genre fiction is associated with the market and market values—including industry, entertainment and imitation—these high cultural forms are seen as separate from the market and aligned with art, creativity and originality.<sup>39</sup> Given these associations, the drop in Australian poetry titles since the mid-1990s would seem to support the view that we have undergone a shift to an increasingly market-driven publishing industry. In turn, reduced publication of Australian poetry would seem to have negative indications for the future of Australian literary novels. It is to Australian literary novels that many critics refer—either implicitly or explicitly—when they describe a contemporary crisis in Australian literature and publishing.

For Davis, Nielson BookScan is at the forefront of the recent multinational- and profit-driven changes to Australian publishing that he argues have led to a reduction in Australian literary fiction. BookScan is a sales database, introduced into Australia in December 2000 and now tracking sales in around 90 per cent of Australian bookstores.<sup>40</sup> As Davis explains, BookScan allows booksellers ‘to order on the basis of what is already selling according to the lists, creating a self-generating effect’ that increases the number of sales of a small number of titles.<sup>41</sup> As Malcolm Knox summarises, ‘popularity engenders more popularity, and conversely a book that starts slowly has little chance of recovering’.<sup>42</sup> A reduction in the range of titles purchased by booksellers leads, in turn, to a reduction in the number of books published. According to Davis, before BookScan ‘it was cheaper to publish the title than research the market’.<sup>43</sup> Now, publishers decide whether to publish a particular book or author based on previous sales.<sup>44</sup>

Davis’s description of changes in bestseller lists—pre- and post-Bookscan—demonstrates a major way in which the availability of sales data is altering Australian publishing. Before BookScan, literary fiction was the ‘cornerstone of the [publishing] industry’s self-perception’,<sup>45</sup> largely because the symbolically important bestseller lists were ‘notoriously filtered’:

Those contacted [for sales information] were most often independents in inner-city locations, close to universities. Genre fiction would routinely be

omitted from their quick, usually anecdotal, assessment of what was moving in the shop, along with any non-fiction deemed lowbrow and unbecoming.<sup>46</sup>

In contrast, genre fiction and non-fiction are at the top of bestseller lists produced using sales data. On the basis of this information, booksellers order less literary fiction and, as a result of the feedback loop described above, publishers produce fewer of these titles.<sup>47</sup> The industry as a whole, Davis asserts, turns to more profitable forms of writing: genre and non-fiction.<sup>48</sup>

Given the 'consumer-driven' nature of this feedback loop, it is perhaps unsurprising that some have blamed readers for what they perceive as a crisis in the publishing of Australian literary fiction.<sup>49</sup> Knox asserts that:

BookScan ... is not the villain ... It is a cipher for the people who ... read for escape rather than transcendence, for relaxation rather than exercise, and whose principle for choosing what to read is to look around the train carriage and say: 'I'll have what he's having.'<sup>50</sup>

This view of readers as a herd who 'respond to books the way children respond to yoyos' portrays people who read anything except literary fiction as bovine and juvenile.<sup>51</sup> McCann expresses a similarly disparaging view of readers who look to fiction for 'entertainment'.<sup>52</sup> But where most commentators perceive contemporary publishing as, in Davis's words, a 'bottom-up, consumer-driven' industry,<sup>53</sup> McCann attributes the current state of Australian literary fiction to 'the undifferentiated nature of the reading public and its dependence on a top-down dispersal of information'.<sup>54</sup> Whether those who do not read literary fiction are understood as actively stupid (Knox), or passively so (McCann), these authors identify a dumbed-down population with a taste for popular fiction at the heart of the apparent crisis in Australian literary fiction publishing.

Knox's and McCann's claims are dubious for a number of reasons, not least for the self-serving nature of these literary fiction authors' construction 'of art ... not based on how well it engages with its intended audience but only how well it engages with a few like minds'.<sup>55</sup> The implicit harking back to a time when literary fiction was the choice of most readers is also questionable: Dolin has shown that nineteenth-century Australian readers preferred popular fiction.<sup>56</sup> And while Knox finds in Davis's article 'empirical evidence that the audience for the Australian

literary novel is indeed shrinking', Davis actually notes that literary fiction 'has always required external, non-market support to survive'.<sup>57</sup> More particularly, these disparaging assessments of the intellectual capacity of modern readers are complicated by the recent and continuing growth in a form of Australian literature not so easily associated with mass-market consumerism as genre fiction—Australian biography and autobiography.

Figure 4 represents publication of Australian edited and authored biography and autobiography titles from 1860 to 2007. Instead of declining with the end of cultural nationalist government funding, and the rise of multinational publishers, Australian auto/biography has increased strongly over the past three to four decades. As Figure 5 indicates, growth in such titles accelerated at the end of the 1990s, as publication of novels levelled off. Although the rise of Australian auto/biography has slowed somewhat in the 2000s, publication continues to increase while that of novels decline.

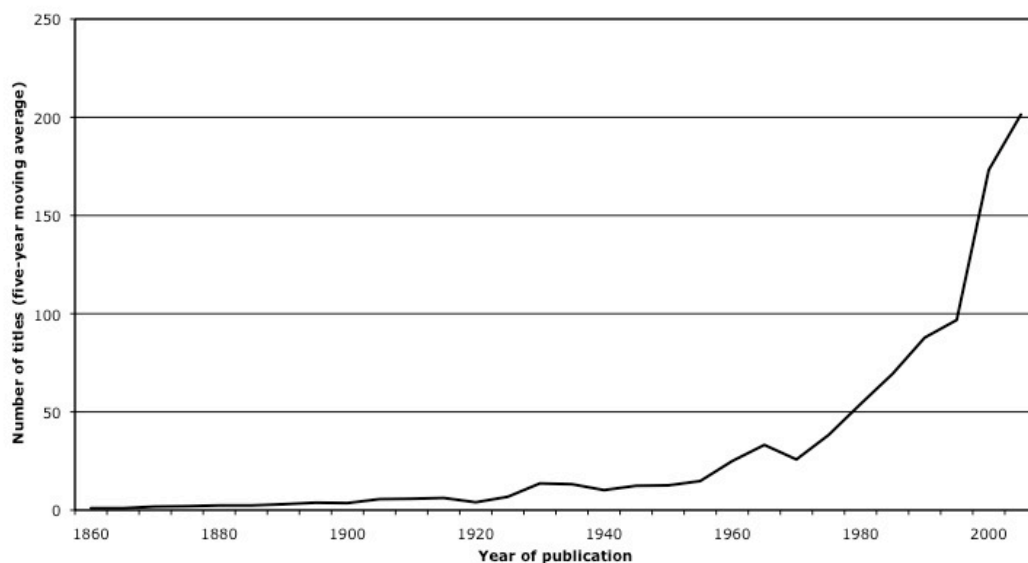


Figure 4: Authored and edited Australian auto/biographies, 1860–2007  
(source: AustLit: The Australian Literature Resource)

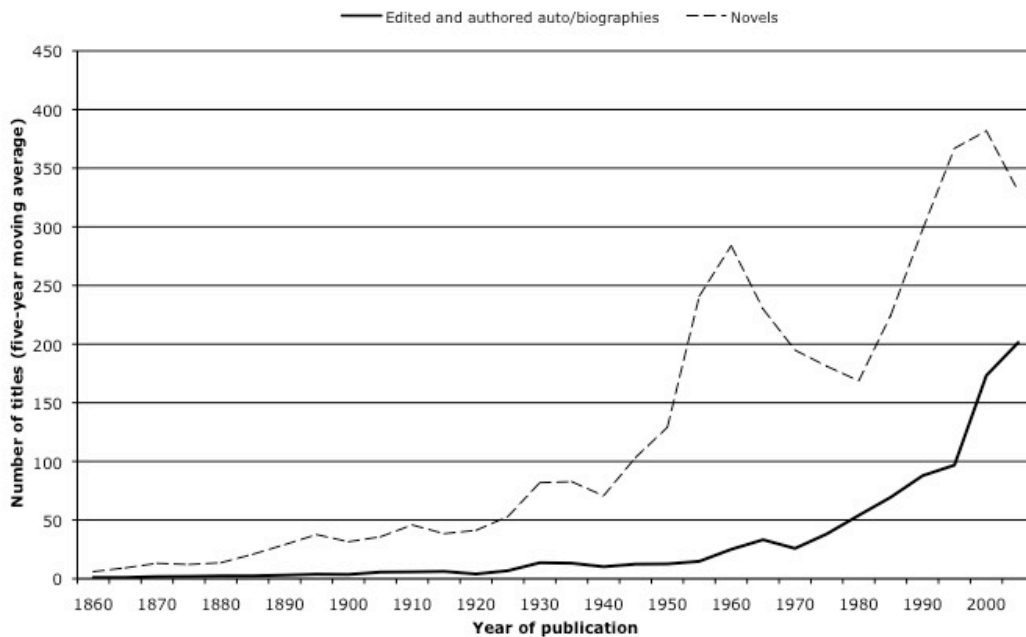


Figure 5: Australian novel and auto/biography titles, 1860–2007  
 (source: AustLit: The Australian Literature Resource)

Asserting that all auto/biography is intellectually challenging is as ridiculous as claiming that all literary fiction is politically radical (or, for that matter, intellectually challenging). Nonetheless, if reader preferences are driving contemporary publishing trends, this growth in auto/biographies presents a more complex picture of such preferences than Knox’s and McCann’s conception of readers as interested only in facile ‘entertainment’. A number of these auto/biographies concern sports people, celebrities or other popular culture icons. But auto/biography cannot be automatically contrasted with literary fiction, which disrupts the simple dichotomy between literary and cultural value on the one hand and popularity, triviality and idiocy on the other that Knox and McCann both draw upon to make their arguments.

The rise of Australian auto/biographies, in contrast to the decline in Australian novels and poetry collections, suggests that reading tastes—and publishing trends—are not devolving but changing. Such growth potentially signals the emergence (to use a phrase of Moretti’s) of a new horizon of reading (and

publishing).<sup>58</sup> As with a comparison of Australian novels and poetry, this trend in Australian auto/biography shows that novels should not be taken as representative of all literature—one form of Australian literature, at least, is on the rise, even if publication of Australian novels and poetry is declining.

—THE DECLINE IN AUSTRALIAN LITERARY FICTION?

But is Australian literary fiction actually in decline? Drawing on a selection of AustLit data, Davis answers this question in the affirmative. After extracting from AustLit details of each novel title produced, during three individual years, by ‘the top ten publishers as ranked by BookScan in 2004’<sup>59</sup>—that is, Australia’s multinational publishers and Allen & Unwin<sup>60</sup>—Davis removed from the resulting list all titles categorised as genre fiction (romance, westerns, fantasy and so on) as well as any other titles he considered non-literary. Based on this dataset, Davis concludes that: ‘In 1996, ... Australia’s multinational publishers and Allen & Unwin, the only comparably sized independent, published 60 literary novels between them. In 2004, those same publishers published 32. In 2006 they published 28.’<sup>61</sup> While Davis does not state the proportion of novels these titles constitute, he uses these results to indicate a significant decline in Australian literary fiction. Davis’s explanation of the reasons for this apparent decline are convincing—and manage to be so without maligning the intellectual capacities of modern readers.

My analysis of AustLit data produces notably different results: a reduction of 25 per cent, instead of more than 50 per cent, in the proportion of Australian literary novels published between 1996 and 2006. Moreover, rather than a sudden decline from the mid-1990s, as Davis’s presentation and explanation of his results imply, the proportion of literary novels has fallen gradually, since the mid-1970s. Some caution is necessary in interpreting these results. While AustLit identifies popular genres, it has no category for literary fiction. A spot-check of AustLit records against novels that would generally be considered literary indicates that such titles are simply not allocated a genre. Admittedly, this is a broad way of defining literary fiction—as those titles without a genre in AustLit—but it is consistent with the way that literary and genre fiction are defined in opposition to one another and, more specifically, with the position of literary fiction as the invisible and normalised standard within literary studies. Figure 6 depicts genre novels as a proportion of total novel titles

published from 1970 to 2007. The black bars (that is, the proportion of non-genre novels) should present a general picture of trends in the publication of Australian literary fiction.

Growth in the proportion of literary (or non-genre) novels at the beginning of the 1970s suggests the impact of increased government funding for, and protection of, such writing at this time. However, this impact is perhaps not as significant, and certainly not as sustained, as is often supposed. From the second half of the 1970s, there is a gradual decline in the proportion of literary novel titles. There is no acceleration of this decline since the mid-1990s, or since 2000, when BookScan was introduced into Australia. In fact, data for 2007 indicates a slight increase in non-genre titles (although this could easily be an aberration rather than the beginning of a trend). This longitudinal analysis of AustLit data reveals a slower and more long-standing reduction in Australian literary fiction than one would expect given Davis’s results and explanations.

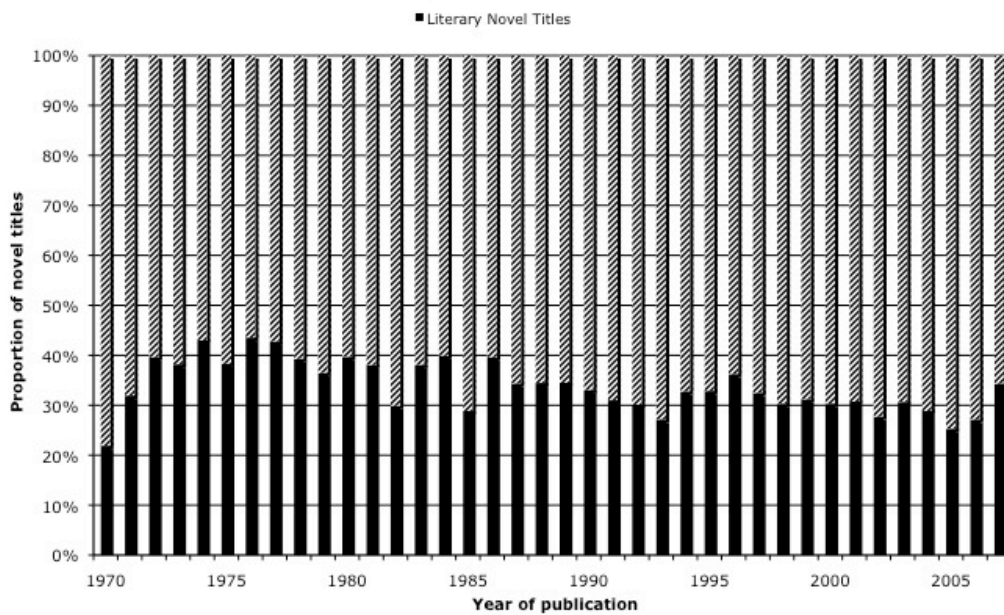


Figure 6: Australian genre novels as a proportion of total novel titles, 1970–2007  
(source: AustLit: The Australian Literature Resource)



What accounts for these differing results? It is not that one dataset is more subjective than the other—Davis’s identification of literary titles may be very different from the next person’s; likewise, my dataset relies on genre allocations made by various AustLit bibliographers. Nor is the difference attributable to my broader definition of literary fiction. As long as literary fiction is categorised consistently within each study, the relative scope of the category should not greatly alter the publishing trends that are identified (certainly, it should not produce a more than 25 per cent variation in results). Rather, these conflicting results are due to the different spectrum of publishers examined: while I include all novel titles, regardless of their publisher, Davis analyses the output of the top ten publishers, according to BookScan data.

Davis’s approach—which aims to survey what is sold, not just what is published—has the benefit of excluding self-published titles that, while included in AustLit, generally reach a limited number of readers and arguably contribute little to Australian literary culture. While self-published titles certainly affect my results, they represent a relatively insignificant proportion of the total: 1.1 per cent in the 1970s, 3.1 per cent in the 1980s, 5.3 per cent in the 1990s and 3.7 per cent in the 2000s. Given the general perception that industry globalisation and conglomeration has made publication more difficult for Australian authors, it is significant that the proportion of self-published titles has decreased rather than increased in the 2000s. Although I can see why Davis would wish to exclude very low impact titles from his results, it is illogical to attempt to identify trends in literary novels—a fictional form that, as he demonstrates, sells less than genre or non-fiction—by only considering the output of publishers that sell the most titles.

Davis’s study in fact demonstrates that the proportion of Australian literary novels produced by Allen & Unwin and multinational publishers is declining—a modified conclusion that my analysis upholds. As Davis does not specify the multinational publishers included in ‘the top ten publishers as ranked by BookScan in 2004’,<sup>62</sup> I defined large publishers by selecting the trade publishers from Fisher’s list of the top twenty publishers in Australia.<sup>63</sup> The resulting list includes Allen & Unwin, Bertelsmann, Hachette Livre, Hodder Headline, News Corporation, Pan Macmillan, Pearson, Random House, Reed International, Scholastic, Simon and Schuster, Torstar and Holtzbrinck. Some of these publishers—Hodder Headline,

Random House and Pan Macmillan—no longer exist as separate entities, but have been subsumed into other companies on the list.<sup>64</sup> A number of these companies encompass a range of imprints that, to the casual observer, would appear to be separate entities. For example, among the imprints employed by Bertelsmann for publishing Australian novels are Random House, Random House Australia, Doubleday, Hutchinson, Hutchinson Australia, Vintage, Vintage Australia, Knopf, Arrow, Jonathan Cape, Hutchinson, Chatto & Windus, Ballantine, Dell, Anchor, Fawcett Books, Red Fox and Crown Publishing.

As figures 7 and 8 demonstrate, in the 1990s and 2000s large publishers consistently produced more genre fiction, as a proportion of their total Australian novel lists, than other publishers. Figure 8 displays the same results as Figure 7, in five-year moving averages (a format that evens out any exceptional peaks or plunges to display overall trends more clearly).

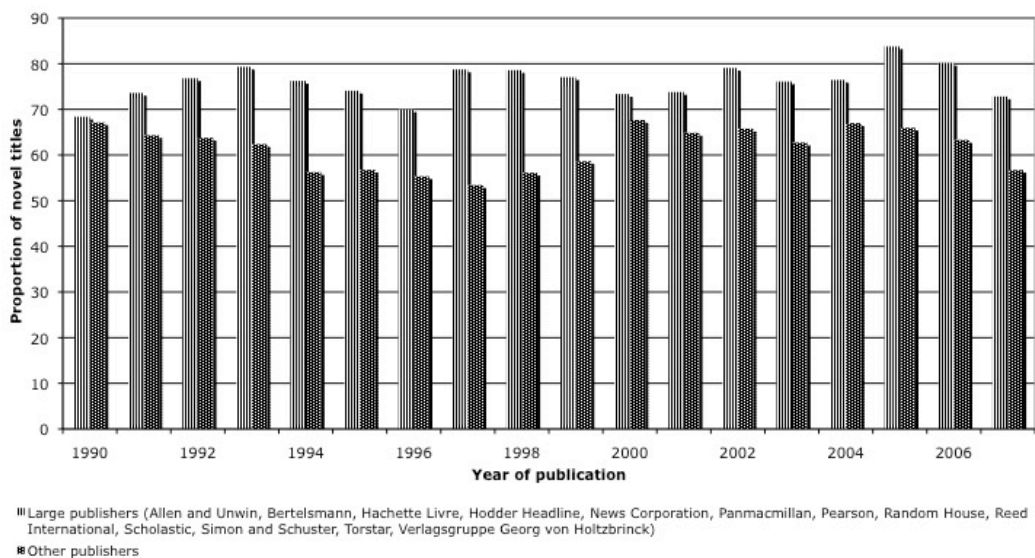


Figure 7: Genre fiction as a proportion of Australian novel titles, 1990–2007  
(source: AustLit: The Australian Literature Resource)

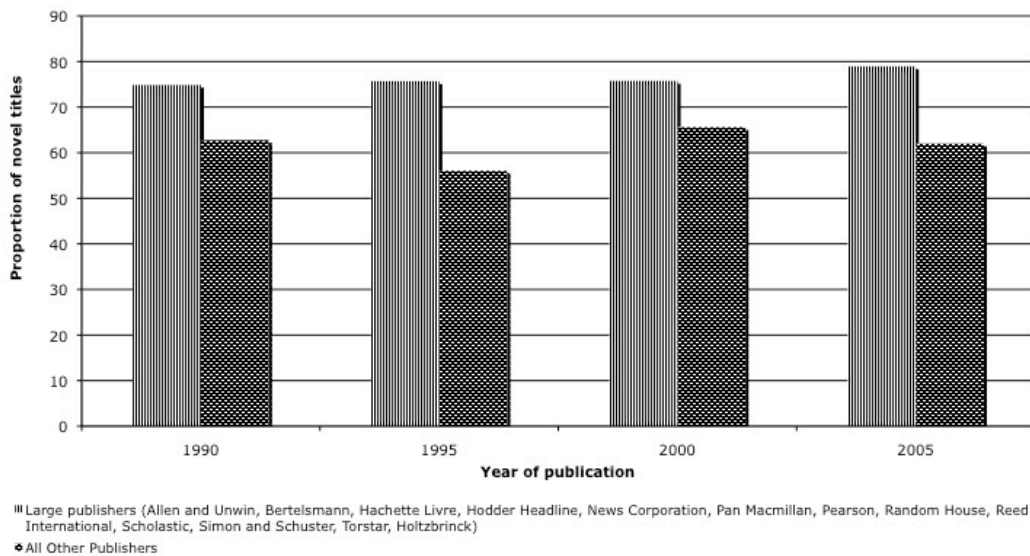


Figure 8: Genre fiction as a proportion of Australian novel titles in five year averages, 1990–2007 (source: AustLit: The Australian Literature Resource)

In 1990, large and ‘other’ publishers produced a relatively equal proportion of genre fiction. As that decade progressed, the proportion of genre titles produced by Allen & Unwin and multinational conglomerates grew. In the mid-1990s, these publishers produced approximately 15 to 25 per cent more genre fiction than the rest of the field. ‘Other’ publishers produced a greater proportion of genre novels in the 2000s than in the 1990s; but the large publishers still produced approximately 10 to 20 per cent more. Figure 8 clearly reveals the overall growth in genre fiction as a proportion of Australian novels produced by large publishers.

Davis uses trends in the output of Allen & Unwin and multinational conglomerates to generalise about trends in the publication of Australian literary novel titles generally because he takes for granted that these publishers have monopolised the industry.<sup>65</sup> Although far more measured in his pronouncements than Wilding or Myers, Davis also assumes that ‘publisher after publisher [has been] swallowed by corporate giants’.<sup>66</sup> However, as Figure 9 reveals, large publishers produce a significant proportion of Australian novel titles—an average of 52.6 per

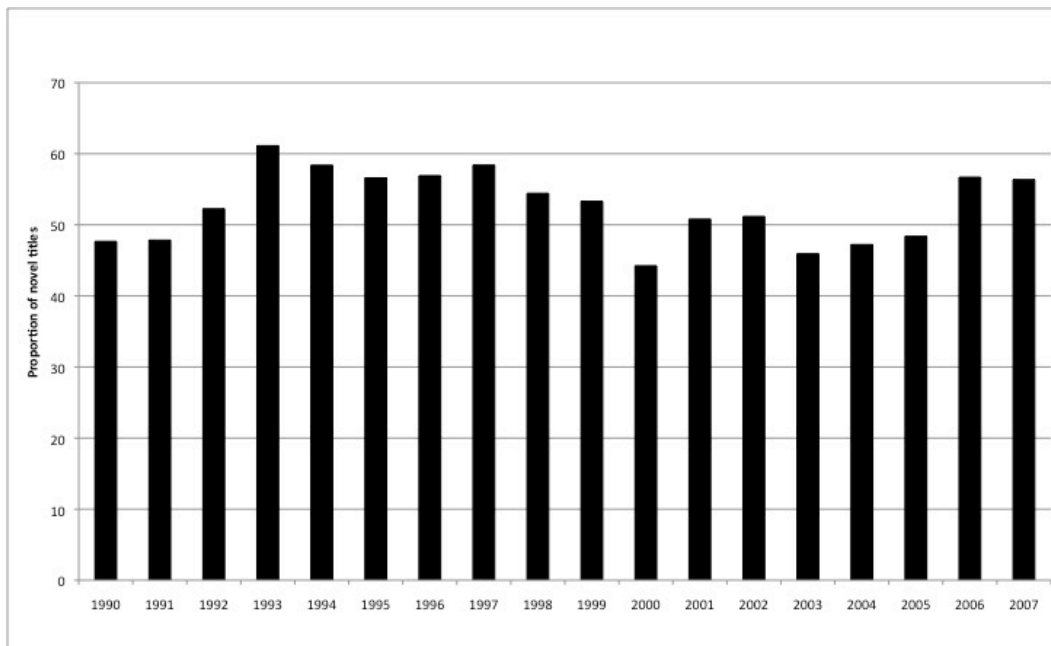


Figure 9: Proportion of Australian novel titles produced by large publishers, 1990–2007  
(source: AustLit: The Australian Literature Resource)

cent in the 1990s and 2000s. Attending only to their output, however, overlooks almost half of all titles published.

Surprisingly, the proportion of Australian novels published by Allen & Unwin and the multinationals has not progressively increased or declined. Rather, growth in the early- to mid-1990s is followed by a decline at the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s, and a return to growth since 2003. Either a progressive growth or decline in the proportion of Australian novels published by these large publishers could be accommodated by dominant accounts of the impact of globalisation and media consolidation on publishing: progressive growth would accord with the view that large publishers have squeezed small and independent publishers out of the market by exerting control over pricing and distribution; a progressive decline would lend support to the idea that multinational publishers are turning away from Australian literature. Instead, undulation in the proportion of novel titles produced by these large publishers indicates that the reality is more complex than either of these broad accounts allows.

Among the trends discernible in this ‘other’ half of the field in the 1990s and 2000s is growth in companies either wholly or partially funded through subsidy-

publishing.<sup>67</sup> Davis argues that, 'literary culture might become a do-it-yourself culture that will operate, for the time being, at least partly outside mainstream publishing'.<sup>68</sup> The growth in subsidy-publishing suggests that this shift is already occurring. But whether or not such publishing can provide a literary culture remains to be seen. In the last decade, electronic and print-on-demand publishing has also become more prominent.<sup>69</sup> But the more pronounced trend is the increased output of Australian literary fiction publishers. This group includes relatively large and established companies (like ABC Books, Hale and Iremonger and Fremantle Press); political or identity-based publishing houses (like The Vulgar Press, Papyrus Press, Pasco Publishing and Spinifex Press); as well as publishers with explicitly literary aims (like Text Publishing, Ginninderra Press, Giramondo Publishing and Brandl and Schlesinger).

While the reduction in Australian novel and poetry titles (since 2000 and 1994 respectively) might appear to affirm claims of a crisis in Australian literature, a data-rich 'distant' reading of the field indicates a more complex picture. It demonstrates that Australian novels have fallen at other times, particularly during war and economic prosperity, without leading to the death of this form. Moreover, the strong growth in Australian auto/biography over the past few decades counteracts assertions of a crisis in Australian literature *per se*, and challenges those (like Knox and McCann) who attribute the decline in Australian novel and poetry titles to reader laziness and stupidity. While large publishers appear to be shifting away from Australian literary fiction, these companies do not represent the entire industry.

More research into 'other' publishers of Australian literature is required, but will need to avoid the simplistic dichotomies that organise much discussion of the publishing industry, particularly the perception that overseas publishers are purely interested in money while local publishers are engaged in some higher, intellectual or nationalist pursuit. Following critics like Frow and Bourdieu, future scholarship on Australian publishing needs to acknowledge 'the absorption of both "high" and "low" culture into commodity production', and attend to the complex negotiations between cultural and economic capital that permeate the publishing industry.<sup>70</sup> Australian literature and publishing are changing. Such change is not necessarily positive, but nor should it be reflexively ascribed the status of a crisis.

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—NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Webby, 'Australian Literature and the Marketplace', in Alison Bartlett, Robert Dixon and Christopher Lee (eds), *Australian Literature and the Public Sphere*, Association for the Study of Australian Literature, Toowoomba, QLD, 1998, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm in Australian Publishing', in David Carter and Anne Galligan (eds), *Making Books: Contemporary Australian Publishing*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2007, p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> Nathan Hollier, 'Between Denial and Despair: Understanding the Decline of Literary Publishing in Australia', *Southern Review*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2007, p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> Hollier, p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Wilding, 'Michael Wilding on Australian Publishing in a Global Environment', *Antipodes*, vol. 14, 2000, pp. 152–4; Michael Wilding, 'Australian Literary and Scholarly Publishing in its International Context', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1999, pp. 57–69; David Myers, 'Getting Published in Australia', *Quadrant*, December 2004, pp. 66–7.

<sup>6</sup> Webby, 'Australian Literature and the Marketplace'; Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm'.

<sup>7</sup> Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*, Verso, London, 2005,

<sup>8</sup> *AustLit*, The Australian Literature Resource, 2002, <[www.austlit.edu.au](http://www.austlit.edu.au)>. I extracted the data for this paper from *AustLit* in February 2008. As with any dataset, the results of this study are approximate. *AustLit* probably does not contain bibliographic details of every Australian novel and, as *AustLit* is regularly updated, the results I present may not be identical to current records. Nevertheless, the dataset I have collected is certainly large enough and full enough to render the impact of small omissions and errors statistically negligible. The random nature of errors and omissions in *AustLit* also means broad trends will remain constant regardless of minor changes.

<sup>9</sup> For example, David Carter and Anne Galligan, 'Introduction', in David Carter and Anne Galligan (eds), *Making Books: Contemporary Australian Publishing*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2007, p.

6; Craig Munro, '2001 Publishing Report Card', in Craig Munro and Robyn Sheahan-Bright (eds), *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946–2005*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2006, p. 87.

<sup>10</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 121.

<sup>11</sup> John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 86.

<sup>12</sup> Wilding, 'Australian Literary and Scholarly Publishing', p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> Wilding, 'Australian Literary and Scholarly Publishing', pp. 57, 64.

<sup>14</sup> Wilding, 'Michael Wilding on Australian Publishing', p. 153.

<sup>15</sup> Wilding, 'Michael Wilding on Australian Publishing', p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> Myers, p. 66.

<sup>17</sup> Wilding, 'Michael Wilding on Australian Publishing', p. 153.

<sup>18</sup> Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*.

<sup>19</sup> Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, pp. 9–12.

<sup>21</sup> Australia has been involved in other wars—most particularly the Korean War (1950–53)—without a corresponding decline in the number of novel titles. In fact, Australia's involvement in the Korean War correlates with a surge rather than a reduction in the number of novel titles (and a surge of which war novels were a significant proportion).

<sup>22</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 120.

<sup>23</sup> Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900*, Verso, London, 1998, p. 154.

<sup>24</sup> 'According to this controversial agreement, Australian-owned publishing companies were not permitted to acquire separate rights to British-originated books. A British publishers buying rights from an American publisher automatically obtained rights to the whole British Empire (except Canada); the US publishers was then obliged to cease supplying the book to Australia and could not sell Australian rights to any Australian publisher'. Brigid Magner, 'Anglo-Australian Relations in the Book Trade,' in Craig Munro and Robyn Sheahan-Bright (eds), *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946–2005*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2006, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Nile, *The Making of the Australian Literary Imagination*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2002, p. 27; Tim Dolin, 'The Secret Reading Life of Us', in Brian Matthew (ed.), *Readers, Writers, Publishers: Essays and Poems*, Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra, 2004, p. 115.

<sup>26</sup> Martyn Lyons, 'Britain's Largest Export Market', in Martyn Lyons and John Arnold (eds), *A History of the Book in Australia: A National Culture in a Colonised Market*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2001, p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> Wilding, 'Michael Wilding on Australian Publishing', p. 153.

<sup>28</sup> Myers, p. 66.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Webby, 'Colonial Writers and Readers', in Elizabeth Webby (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 66.

- <sup>30</sup> Dolin, p. 115; see also, Webby, 'Colonial Writers and Readers', p. 54.
- <sup>31</sup> Magner, p. 8; see also, Webby, 'Colonial Writers and Readers', p. 54.
- <sup>32</sup> Mark Davis, 'Literature, Small Publishers and the Market in Culture', *Overland*, vol. 190, 2008, p. 6.
- <sup>33</sup> Toni Johnson-Woods, 'The Mysterious Case of Carter Brown: or, Who Really Killed the Australian Author?', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2004, p. 74.
- <sup>34</sup> Katherine Bode, 'From British Domination to Multinational Conglomeration? A Revised History of Australian Novel Publishing, 1950 to 2007', in Katherine Bode and Robert Dixon (eds), *Resourceful Reading: The New Empiricism, eResearch and Australian Literary Culture*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 2010, pp. 202–3.
- <sup>35</sup> Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, *The New Diversity: Australian Fiction 1970–88*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1989, p. 2–4.
- <sup>36</sup> Bode, 'From British Domination to Multinational Conglomeration?', pp. 221–2.
- <sup>37</sup> David Carter traces the centrality of the novel in debates about Australian literature to Vance Palmer, who saw in 'the ideal form of the novel ... an ideal image of the national culture itself'. David Carter, 'Critics, Writers, Intellectuals: Australian Literature and its Criticism', in Elizabeth Webby (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 267.
- <sup>38</sup> *AustLit* describes this type of publication as a 'collected work'.
- <sup>39</sup> Ken Gelder, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*, Routledge, London, 2004.
- <sup>40</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 117.
- <sup>41</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 126.
- <sup>42</sup> Malcolm Knox, 'Pushing Against the Real World: The Case for "Original" Australian Fiction', *Overland*, vol. 182, 2006, p. 6.
- <sup>43</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 125.
- <sup>44</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', pp. 125–6. See also Malcolm Knox, 'The Ex Factor: BookScan and the Death of the Australian Novelist', *The Monthly*, May 2005, pp. 52–3 and Hollier, p. 67.
- <sup>45</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 120.
- <sup>46</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 116.
- <sup>47</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 126.
- <sup>48</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 122.
- <sup>49</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 126.
- <sup>50</sup> Knox, 'The ExFactor', p. 55.
- <sup>51</sup> Knox, 'The ExFactor', p. 55.
- <sup>52</sup> Andrew McCann, 'How to Fuck a Tuscan Garden: A Note on Literary Pessimism', *Overland*, vol. 177, 2004, p. 24.
- <sup>53</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 126.
- <sup>54</sup> McCann, p. 24.



<sup>55</sup> Jeremy Fisher, 'The Professional Author: Researching Creativity and Reality', in *Alchemy: Blending Research and Creativity, the Tenth Annual Conference of the Australian Association of Writing Programs*, Curtin University of Technology, Perth. November 2005, p. 4 of 27, <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/april06/fisher.htm>>.

<sup>56</sup> Dolin, p. 116.

<sup>57</sup> Knox, 'Pushing Against the Real World', p. 5; Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 130.

<sup>58</sup> The growing popularity of auto/biography has been remarked upon previously. But this study offers empirical evidence of this perceived trend. See Webby, 'Australian Literature and the Marketplace', p. 17; Amanda Lohrey, cited in Jane Sullivan, 'What's the Story with Australian Fiction?', *Age* 14 August 2004, <<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/08/11/1092102516301.html>>.

<sup>59</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', fn. 6.

<sup>60</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 120.

<sup>61</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 120.

<sup>62</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', fn. 6.

<sup>63</sup> Fisher, page 15 of 27. I excluded Oxford University Press (appearing at number 20 of Fisher's list) from my analysis on the basis that a university press is substantively different to these other publishers. In any case, Oxford University Press has not published many Australian novels.

<sup>64</sup> Hodder Headline—formed by the 1993 merger of Headline and Hodder & Stoughton—was acquired by Hachette Livre in 2004; Random House was bought by Bertelsmann in 1998; and Pan Macmillan—formed in 1989 by the merger of Pan Books and Macmillan—was acquired by Holtzbrinck in 1999.

<sup>65</sup> In a subsequent article Davis modifies this view, acknowledging the significance of the local publishing industry. Davis, 'Literature, Small Publishers and the Market in Culture'.

<sup>66</sup> Wilding, 'Australian Literary and Scholarly Publishing', p. 59.

<sup>67</sup> Such companies include Seaview Press, Boolarong Press, Wild & Woolley, Sid Harta Publishers, Black Pepper, Brolga Publishing and Peacock Publications.

<sup>68</sup> Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm', p. 131.

<sup>69</sup> Companies in this group include Jacobyte Books, Interactive Press, Equilibrium Books, DreamCraft and BeWrite Books.

<sup>70</sup> Frow, p. 17; Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed', *Poetics*, vol. 12, 1983, pp. 311–56.