
Festival Days

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‘WHAT DO WOMEN WANT?’ Even if Sigmund Freud didn’t have writers’ festivals in mind when he framed his famous question, it is apt enough in the context of the many pleasant-faced, intelligent-looking, female ticket-holders at these celebrations of readerly *jouissance*. Mingling with them during the first three days of the Western Australian Writers’ Festival — one of the activities of the cutely named PIAF, or Perth International Arts Festival — what *I* wanted was to find out why *they* were there, other than to hear celebrity speakers such as Michael Palin (Booked Out).

Surprisingly, ‘Writing and Editing’ was one of the most popular sessions. A number of people were turned away from the packed theatre, even though by ten a.m. on Sunday morning the thermometer had already hit the high thirties. (Several venues had to be rapidly switched as organisers realised that rooms without air conditioning, however elegant — and the Hellenic Gallery in the Museum was impressive — were unendurable during the heatwave.) Sitting on the floor, I could just glimpse the panel: two matched pairs of writers and editors, all Western Australian. The banter between John Long, a palaeontologist and author of several works of popular science, and Jane Hammond-Foster, the editor of his current book on dinosaurs, displayed the friendly, but wary, cooperation that is surely the hallmark of this relationship. The audience loved their byplay, while the chair, Richard Nile, himself both a writer and editor, made the point that the writer–editor relationship is defined not only by negotiation and trust, but also by firm intervention.

During question time, aspiring writers were avid to sign up with Jane, while would-be editors asked how and where they could be trained. People like myself, who have always thought that editors are insufficiently acknowledged by the industry, were pleased to learn that Western Australia’s two independent presses make a practice of including the editor’s name in the credits. Even more unusually, they still accept unsolicited manuscripts, there apparently being no literary agents operating in the state. Also on the dais was Michele Drouart, a freelance editor and author who won a WA Premier’s Book Award with *Into the Wadi* in 2000. Michele’s version of the relationship charmed the audience. ‘The editor,’ she said, ‘gets the first intimate acquaintance with a text, and this intimate acquaintance carries over to the author.’ More gratification all round.

The session called ‘Everyone’s a Critic’ was far less cosy. It began by criticising its own title. Not everyone, protested the chair, Caroline Baum, has either the capacity or the wish to be a critic, nor any interest in pondering the role of criticism in our lives. Who was to say whether it should offer mere information or authoritative advice? Caroline invited the panel to

address the problem, with unexpected results. To a man (Caroline was the only woman on the platform), they repudiated criticism, both in theory and practice, as a nasty, mean activity that they all despised. For Bob Gordon, former editor of Perth’s rock magazine *X-Press*, it required adjectives such as ‘constructive’ or ‘positive’ in front of it to be in any way acceptable, while ‘a critic’ was ‘shallow and negative’. Bob reiterated that he never wanted to be known as anything but a reviewer, and a ‘soft’ one at that. He was supported by Peter Castaldi, a film critic, who equated criticism with the ‘critical analysis’ taught at universities and inevitably characterised by research and footnotes rather than by ‘enthusiastic participation’. ‘I could never be a critic,’ confided Castaldi, ‘because I could never distance myself enough.’ At the same time, in what seemed a somewhat contradictory move, he criticised reviewers who lack the theoretical language to express their opinion of films and hence resort to outlining the story. Brett D’Arcy, the only literary reviewer present, also forgave himself for going ‘soft’ (it was a favoured word) on emerging Australian writers, deploring the fact that ‘the famous are always reviewed positively’.

At this point, your columnist was unable to resist suggesting (shouting?) that the knowledge and experience of D’Arcy’s ‘tired’ critics might conceivably be of some value in forming educative judgments, and that a little hard criticism could potentially do more for the formation of public taste and opinion than any amount of soft reviewing. My vehemence seemed to stun the panel, but was generously supported from the chair, who agreed that a writers’ festival might reasonably allocate more slots than one out of three to reviewers writing about books.

The creative process clearly fascinated many participants. One session that aroused interest contained Andrew Bovell’s revelations about the gestation of *Lantana*, first conceived as a short story, then transformed into a radio play, and later rewritten for the stage, before being turned into the acclaimed film. Bovell must have got it right — he has since been offered thirty-four novels to adapt.

Regrettably, I could only get to one theatre event during my few days in Perth. This was *The Corporal’s Wife*, a product of international cooperation between Australia and Croatia, mounted by the Perth Theatre Company. The triumph of the play — ribald, funny and heart-wrenching — was its ability to intrigue despite the complete absence of anything that could be called a plot. Written in 1800 by Vlado Stulli, a hospital orderly, it depended on (excellently translated) dialogue to capture the spirited exchanges and bawdy insults of a poverty-stricken, rumbustious family in Dubrovnik. The East European flavour, and the star-studded consular array in the first-night audience, certainly underlined the I in PIAF.