

## What is Australian Science Fiction?

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I recently completed a study entitled 'The Marketability of Australian Science Fiction in Local and Foreign Markets'. The aim of my study was to examine the international market for Australian Science Fiction (SF) for adults, concentrating on the market opportunities and barriers applying specifically to Australian SF. However, before I could do so, I found it necessary to answer the question: what is Australian SF? By examining recent publications, and surveying key members of the publishing industry, I hoped to determine whether Australia does indeed produce works with uniquely Australian characteristics; for example, peculiarities of language and expression, Australian attitudes, Australian settings and characters, and current Australian issues. I surveyed thirty-four industry experts regarding their perceptions of Australian SF, and undertook ten case studies focussed on non-media Australian SF novels for adults published in 2003, both in Australia and overseas. The case studies consisted of a qualitative content analysis of the texts, a survey of the authors of the novels, and an examination of their publishing histories. The survey participants were: Max Barry, Adrian Bedford, Russell Blackford, Ashley Capes (Detrusa Promotions Literary Agent), Jay Caselberg, Paul Collins, Bill Congreve (MirrorDanse Books), Mary Cunnane (Mary Cunnane Literary Agency), Jack Dann, Brendan Duffy, Tom Dullemond, Sarah Endacott (Orb Speculative Fiction), Dr Jeremy Fisher (Director of the ASA), Bruce Gillespie (SF Commentary), Debbie Golvan (Golvan Arts Management), Donna Maree Hanson (CSFG), Edwina Harvey (ASIM), Simon Haynes, Dr Van Ikin, Ian Irvine, Chris Lawson, Sean McMullen, Rose Mitchell, Nigel Read (ASIM), Carol Ryles, Rachel Skinner (Rick Raftos Management), Cat Sparks (Agog! Press), Robert N Stephenson (Altair-Australia), Keith Stevenson (Aurealis), Andrew Sullivan, Alinta Thornton, Kim Wilkins, Sean Williams and Tara Wynne (Curtis Brown). The novels included in my study were: Jennifer Government by Max Barry, Orbital Burn by Adrian Bedford, Wyrmhole by Jay Caselberg, The Earthborn by Paul Collins, Orphans of Earth by Sean Williams and Shane Dix, Terminator Gene by Ian Irvine, Breakaway by Joel Shepherd, Hal Spacejock: Second Course by Simon Haynes, The Shift of the Ages: At the End of Time by Jean Nemeyeth, and A Sunburnt Country by Andrew Sullivan. The numerous existing definitions of SF vary considerably in their degree of inclusiveness. I have applied an inclusive approach, an example of which is the following definition from Sam Moskowitz (1976, cited in Ikin 1982): Science Fiction is a branch of fantasy identifiable by the fact that it eases the 'willing suspension of disbelief' on the part of its readers by utilising an atmosphere of scientific credibility for its imaginative speculation in physical science, space, time, social science and philosophy. In 1995, an article written by Greg Egan was published in *Eidolon* 17/18, in which Egan is highly critical of what he considers to be the obsession of many critics with the defining of Australian SF, which he argues is due to a type of 'lingering insecurity': Australian SF is claimed to be intrinsically different from SF written anywhere else in the world. Special. Exotic. Unique &mdash; but not merely in the sense that every work of any degree of originality is unique. No, real Australian SF contains Miracle Ingredient A, which no other SF in the world can possess! (Egan 1995). Egan (1995) advises all writers, regardless of their origin to write about whatever they choose, in whatever tradition they prefer. Former editor of *Aurealis*, Stephen Higgins (1999) agrees, stating that 'To claim that a distinct Australian element exists in Australian SF is to deny the creativity of our writers and smacks a little of jingoistic nationalism'. Egan (1995) goes on to suggest that this insistence on a 'uniquely Australian' SF, is pressuring writers to 'produce a brand name product', which is no more unique than work imitating fiction produced elsewhere. However, although Egan detests works discussing the existence of 'Miracle ingredient A', he does not actually dispute its existence. Instead he emphasises, 'the last thing this essay is about is calling for less (or more, or different) writing about Australia in Australian science fiction'. In Dirk Strasser's editorial in *Aurealis* #23 (1999), he argues against the viewpoints of Egan and Higgins, stressing that the work of a writer brought up in Australia will be essentially different from that of someone brought up in America; he says, 'Australian and American societies are different. Not alien-from-another-world different, but certainly different in a myriad of subtle and not so subtle ways'. Some distinctive characteristics of Australian fiction are relatively easy to identify, such as Australian settings, characters and language. Others are less tangible, for example recurring attitudes and themes in our literature. In Higgins's rebuttal to Strasser's editorial in *Aurealis* #24 (1999), he concedes that the work of Terry Dowling does have a particular characteristic that marks it as 'Australian': 'It is the feel of the stories&hellip; the openness, perhaps. Certainly the Australian element lies within the sense of place that Dowling creates'. Jack Dann provides an interesting perspective as an American now playing an integral role in Australian SF, and in bringing it to the attention of the world. Dann stresses, 'I've been in Australia now for five years. It has affected the fiction' (Dann & Webb 1999). In the same article, Webb points out that it is no longer unacceptable, as it once was, for Australians wanting to succeed internationally to write with an 'Australian accent'. She proposes that, 'There's a different voice, a different way of looking at the world, that's Australian. Partly because Australia's a genuinely secular culture'. Australia's role in the world is certainly very different from that of the USA and the UK. This is reflected in our culture and inevitably also in our literature. The majority of survey respondents do not believe Australian SF differs greatly from the work produced elsewhere. However, a number of characteristics were commonly identified as distinguishing it to some extent. The most obviously Australian characteristic of our SF is the use of Australian landscape (Congreve, Harvey, Irvine, Lawson, Ryles and Thornton), examples of which appear in Terry Dowling's work (Harvey and Ryles), and Damien Broderick's *Dreaming Dragons* (Harvey). However, most Australian SF does not feature the Australian

landscape. Even if you dispute the existence of a unique voice in Australian SF, it would be difficult to dispute that Australia offers a unique landscape in which to set our fiction. Although SF is often set in far future settings on alien worlds, these environments generally more closely resemble North America and Europe than does Australia. SF is also often set on Earth in the present, relatively near future, and sometimes the past. In these cases, it would seem natural for Australian writers to set their fiction in Australia. George Turner (quoted in Strasser 1990), who set much of his work in Melbourne, said, "I use Melbourne because I'm a Melburnian". However, Strasser (1999) laments that in every speculative fiction writing class he has taught, a number of students invariably set their stories in New York, despite the fact that few of them have ever been there. He argues that "a writer writes most effectively if their work is grounded in what they know. If the only experience they have had of a city is second-hand, it is impossible for them to provide anything fresh". Although half of the case study novels were at least partially set in Australia, of these only *The Earthborn* and *A Sunburnt Country* focus significantly on Australian scenery. *The Earthborn* is set in the remains of Melbourne (45%) and in the Dandenongs (a mountainous area outside Melbourne) (49%). Collins refers frequently to Australian flora and fauna, and to specific Australian locations, which helps to build a vivid picture of the Australian landscape. *A Sunburnt Country* is set primarily in Melbourne (59%) and rural Victoria (41%). It contains numerous references to specific Australian locations; some references to Australian flora and fauna; and references to cricket and Australian Football. The "Australianness" of this book could restrict its marketability in overseas markets, as foreign readers would be unfamiliar with much of its content. Egan (1995) criticises David Alexander Smith's review of Sean McMullen's *Voices in the Light* in the *New York Review of Science Fiction* (1994), as an example of the type of writing obsessed with the nationality of Australian writers. Nevertheless, the following quotation suggests that outsiders see the Australian landscape as one which has much to offer SF: In many ways, Australia is an ideal setting for science fiction; Australia is an exotic, wonderful place, young technology mixing with ancient primitivism; the patina of Western culture laid over a vast land suffused with mystic Aboriginal heritage (Smith 1994, cited in Egan 1995). However, non-Aboriginal writers may be reluctant to include interpretations of Aboriginal heritage, as they lack sufficient understanding of the subject and are unsure of the appropriateness of references to Indigenous Australian culture. The Australia Council publication, *Writing Cultures: Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Literature* (Janke & Heiss 2002) can help writers to address these concerns. The Australian character is another commonly occurring feature distinguishing our SF (Irvine). The most frequently mentioned aspect of our national identity is the distinctly Australian humour (Barry, Gillespie, Haynes and Sullivan), particularly dry humour (Haynes and Thornton), and irony (Barry and Blackford). Another Australian trait is seen to be our distrust and lack of respect for authority (Haynes and Thornton). Of the case study novels, *Hal Spacejock: Second Course* is overtly humorous, *Jennifer Government* is satirical, and dry humour plays a significant role in *Orbital Burn* and *Breakaway*. Irreverence is also an important trait in the characters appearing in *Jennifer Government*, *Orbital Burn*, *Wyrmhole*, *The Earthborn*, *Orphans of Earth*, *Breakaway*, *Hal Spacejock*, and *A Sunburnt Country*. "George Turner once said that the defining element of Australian SF was its dialogue" (Higgins 1999). However, in regards to particularly Australian language, Egan (1995) says: Idiomatic Australian speech is now largely just a middle-class pretension, indulged in by a few faded, Whitlam-era hypernationalists, as dated as the fanatical Anglophilia of twenty years before. The urban Australian dialects now come straight from LA, and the rural straight from Nashville. In contrast, Bruce Gillespie (2000) applauds the inclusion in the 1999 Tor publication *Centaurus: The Best of Australian Science Fiction* of Kevin McKay's story "Pie Row Joe", which was the subject of controversy when it first appeared in 1976, due to the author's use of "ocker" language: "I'd never see wool burnin' proper, like wood". Gillespie concedes that non-Australians would have difficulty reading "Pie Row Joe", but argues that the language of the main character is appropriate, and that sometimes the use of distinctly "Australianness" dialogue can be important to a piece of fiction. Most of the case study novels do not include significant examples of distinctly Australian language. However, *A Sunburnt Country* contains frequent examples of colloquial Australian language, which could make it difficult for non-Australians to comprehend. Interestingly, the foreign publication of *The Earthborn* contains the most notable use of Australian language. The language of "the Earthborn" (Australian) characters has developed from the Australian accent of the present day into a broad dialect, which Collins uses occasionally in the book's dialogue, for example, "They'r strippin you bloke. Gor ani foo withem?" (p. 31). Although a variety of issues are dealt with in the case study novels, they are generally of global rather than specifically Australian interest. However, the effects of severe drought dealt with in *A Sunburnt Country* are of particular relevance to an Australian audience, many of whom are already suffering from the drought which in Sullivan's book has continued until 2032. The intended genocide of the population of Victoria by repatriates from space in *The Earthborn* also parallels European civilisation's decimation of the Australian Aborigines, which is referred to directly on page 82. Australian SF also tends to be less confined to genre (Mitchell, Read, Ryles, Sparks, Stevenson and Thornton), often blending with fantasy, horror, magic realism, and slipstream. This claim of an Australian predilection for cross-genre work is supported by the case study results, as six of the novels incorporate aspects of other genres. *Orbital Burn* and *Wyrmhole* are SF detective novels, although the SF elements within both books are dominant. *The Shift of the Ages* combines elements of SF and fantasy, and it is clearly targeted at the "new age" market. *Terminator Gene* and *A Sunburnt Country* are eco-thrillers and *Jennifer Government*, which is only marginally SF, is a corporate satire; all three were marketed as general fiction. Almost none of the authors surveyed consciously limit the Australian content of the works they submit to foreign markets (Caselberg, Collins, Congreve, Dann, Duffy, Dullemond, Harvey, Haynes, Lawson, Read, Ryles, Sparks, Stevenson, Sullivan and Thornton). However, Sean McMullen is careful to exclude blatantly local references from his work, instead writing about Australian content as if he were a foreigner, writing for other foreigners. Max Barry also avoids writing books that rely on readers' knowledge or understanding

of Australia, and Sean Williams says, 'I hope that I would be aware of a purely local cultural reference or in-joke while writing for an overseas market, but that doesn't mean I would necessarily cut it'. Since McMullen, Williams and Barry have all experienced considerable foreign success; it is therefore interesting that while they do not necessarily limit the Australian content of their work, they appear to be more conscious of its effects than other writers. Whilst most authors do not consciously avoid Australian content, many works which are set in Australia are only identifiable by the inclusion of Australian place names. Thus, although such works are superficially distinguishable as Australian, they do not invoke any distinctive imagery. In contrast, other works are so distinctly Australian that their international potential may be limited, e.g. Sullivan's, *A Sunburnt Country*. In a limited number of works the Australian landscape and other Australian characteristics play an important role, without necessarily limiting their international potential, e.g. Collins's *The Earthborn*. The marketability of Australian SF is of course affected by many diverse factors. As to the effects of the distinguishing characteristics of Australian SF on its marketability at home and abroad, I'll save that discussion for another day. The above article is based on part of the following dissertation: Cleary, L 2004, *The Marketability of Australian Science Fiction in Local and Foreign Markets*, MA dissertation, University of Southern Queensland. References

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