Interview with Dorothy Johnston

Pamela Hewitt

Australian novelist Dorothy Johnston recently had the unusual experience of working with an editor after publication.

The Australian edition of her novel *The Trojan Dog* came out in 2000. When US publisher St Martin's Press bought it, along with a second novel, *The White Tower*, the editorial process started again. It was illuminating to compare the approaches of the two publishers and their editors. Interesting for editors, too, in a world where publishing is an increasingly global phenomenon.

Jumpers and galahs

Not surprisingly, the US publishers asked for changes to terms that might be unfamiliar to American readers. While Australian readers understand the meaning of, say, faucet almost instinctively because of their exposure to American media, American readers are less likely to know what a tap is. This aspect of the editing didn't present real problems to Johnston. 'The easiest thing for me to do, as an author responding to my American editor was to change a word—for example to change *jumper* to *sweater*—or to find a context where a colloquialism like *fair dinkum* made sense. There were more Australian colloquialisms than I thought.

'My editor sent me, first of all, a detailed general critique of the plot, the characters, the whole thing, and then a list of vocabulary which he either wanted me to change, to find a synonym which was an international word, or to find a way to contextualise my phrase, so that it wouldn't strike their readership as an obstacle.'

These superficial adjustments were an easy matter. Revisiting the published work as a manuscript was more demanding. The desire to leave a book behind after publication is common to authors and editors alike. 'After I publish a book, I don't even want to read it. You go through this emotional and psychological process. You let it go. It goes out into the public arena, warts and all—the mistakes, what you could have done better. And you think that's the end. I could perhaps go back after five years and bear to read them.'

With US publication, Johnston didn't just read the text again. It was more a case of going through it with fine-toothed comb, following the editor's suggesions.

'It went through at least three or four stages. He was extraordinarily thorough and the copyeditor who got it after that checked everything. He found a mistake with the date somebody died. I went back in my manuscript to try and find it in my notes and I think it must have got into the Australian edition as a typo.'

Most writers are pleased to have errors like these picked up but authors don't always welcome copyediting suggestions. 'I've had the experience

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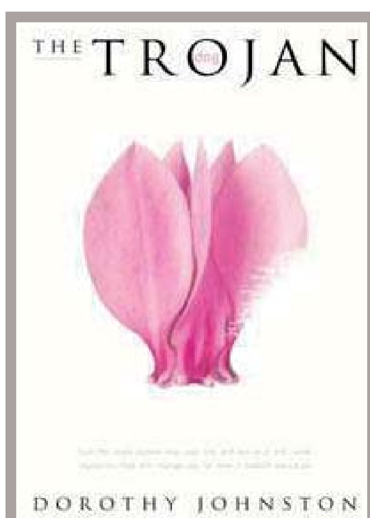
in a copyedit of all my punctuation being altered to semicolons and colons and all my sentences turned around so that they were facing the same way. It changes the rhythm of the sentences. My punctuation is rather idiosyncratic. Not as idiosyncratic as some people's but I never use semicolons or colons. I like dashes. My commas have to do the work of practically every other form of punctuation. That's what I can hear in my head. I've got my punctuation the way I've got it because it gives the rhythm that I want. I think an awful lot about my commas. If I've got a comma before an and, I've got a reason for putting it there, and if I haven't got a comma, likewise I've got a reason for not having it there. 'I had no idea what an American copyedit would be like. I was a bit scared after having been through this washing machine thing that the copyedit would be all-over changes. But the copyeditor just put in his little cover note "This is your style". In almost every case it was OK. That was a big relief.'

Putting the jigsaw back together

The real challenge came with structural work. It was also ultimately rewarding. 'Before *The Trojan Dog*, I'd been a literary novelist. I still regard myself mostly as a literary novelist. I never set out to write *The Trojan Dog* as a crime novel. It just sort of announced itself to me that that was the form it had to be in. I had to have this woman investigating a crime. But I was quite open when I got his report to the idea that there was a lot wrong with it. It was a learning experience for me writing in a new genre. I wasn't at all surprised when he said that there were lots of things that didn't work.

'The hardest thing was to face the old text with his comments and criticisms alongside it. I'd think "Yes, well, he's right, but what on earth can I do with something that I wrote all these years ago?"

'I thought they might not like so much Canberra stuff. There's a lot of description of Canberra, seasonal stuff, and some quite metaphorical things in *The Trojan Dog*. There's a metaphorical journey inside a Trojan horse—not a wooden Trojan horse but a virtual one. I thought he might just say "Get rid of it all". Streamline it and turn it into much more of a conventional crime novel. Get rid of what I thought made it distinctive, even though they were literary things. But he didn't want me to do that. All of the things he homed in on were actual weaknesses.



'There were big structural changes. It was the first time it happened to me that somebody had taken a book which conceptually is quite old and said "Look, this is what needs to be done to this book to improve it". This is a gross phrase to use, but it's like eating your own vomit.

'I didn't find it confronting because I agreed with him. It was certainly

extremely difficult, on a whole range of levels. I put an enormous amount of effort into responding to that first report and sending him the manuscript again and he sent me another long list of things that still needed attention.

'I went through it three times, thinking "OK, now that's it", but it wasn't at all. He read it four times. It had to be done more quickly, obviously, than you'd write the original manuscript. It's very hard, especially in a crime novel, because of the synergy. Everything affects everything else. I know that in any text that's true, but there are particular ways that that's true in a crime novel. And you can run into some quite intractable problems that have been set up by telling the story in a certain way or by the narrator. The problems can be difficult to nut out. You can change something, and because you don't have a lot of time to reflect and to think about it and to recall everything you can actually make silly mistakes. I was really scared that that would happen, that it would end up being worse.

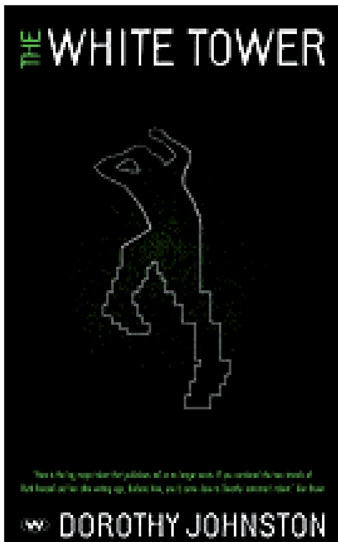
'I relied on them to remember, to think "No, Dorothy, you can't do that because that will affect that. It was okay in the original but if you're going to do this, you're going to have to do that", and so on. It was putting the whole jigsaw back together differently.'

Working with editors

Writers work in different ways with editors. Some welcome the editor's input. For others it's a tug-of-war. Is editing always necessary or is it something that writers can learn to apply to their work? 'With my novels, I get them to a certain stage myself and I need to have a break from them. And since I've published quite a few books now, I usually send it off because I don't want to think about it any more! I've been through a few drafts, I've shown it to a few friends and I've done what I think I can with it. That's perhaps my own myopia. I'll always be like that. I'll get a manuscript, on my own, to a certain stage, and it will need another person.'

Dorothy Johnston was a member of a group of seven Canberra writers whose 1988 book of short stories, *Canberra Tales*, also included contributions by Margaret Barbalet, Sara Dowse, Suzanne Edgar, Marian Eldridge, Marion Halligan and Dorothy Horsfield. Johnston said having her work critiqued by other writers was completely different to working with an editor. 'I had nearly two decades of being in a writer's group where we met every month and we discussed each other's work. Up to a point I became quite competent. But beyond that, I think I've reached my level of self editing.

'In our group, people would work things out or they'd say things, but nobody ever gave my work the thorough, in-depth sort of attention that a professional editor could give. Which is not to say that some of their insights weren't valuable. It was a relaxed atmosphere. After all, it was a friendship group and it was to help things along the way. But with a professional editor, the power dynamic is quite different. They're working for the people who have the money to publish you—or not.'



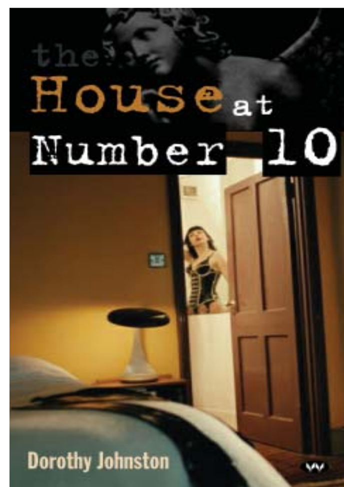
A good editing relationship involves developing a rapport with the author. As with any other relationship, the chemistry isn't always right. 'I haven't always had good editors. The American guy was really fantastic but I've had some editors who I've disagreed with. I had a bad editing experience with someone who I thought was just completely not on my wavelength, they just weren't into what I was really on about.

'They're midwives, really, good editors. The baby's coming out and the midwife has to work on that baby, not some other fictional baby that they've got in their mind. The first skill is to recognise the baby for what it is, or what it's aiming to be.

'I've got a wonderful Australian editor at the moment. She did *The White Tower* and now she's doing this new literary one. She's freelance. She sent me her report and we've had a few exchanges of emails. I've talked to her on the phone and we've met a couple of times. I think it was good to meet, to hear her voice. By the time I got to meet her, there were a few quite tricky things and it was good to nut them out. She's quite tough. She hasn't wasted my time and hers telling me everything was rosy. She would give me any time and any effort that I asked for. She's quite young, but she's very smart. She's got this ability to see into things.

'Other editors I've worked with don't even try to make suggestions. They just tell you what's wrong. It's easy to point to the faults. It's really only the half of it. She puts options. She'll say "Well this is a way to do this or think about doing this".'

Johnston commented that one of the striking differences between Australian and American publishing is the resources that go into the editorial process. 'One is that they have money and two, they make the decision that they're going to pay somebody to put that amount of effort into it. It was an enormous amount of work.'



So will this experience of more detailed structural editing change the way Johnston works? 'I don't know if it will affect the way I write in future. It will be interesting to see what happens with the second book.' Keep an eye out for it. And for her next Australian publication, *The House at Number 10*, about a suburban brothel in Canberra, set at the time when the laws about prostitution were being changed. It will be published by Wakefield Press later this year.

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