

## ***At the Typeface***

*Reviewed by Rosemary Luke*

**Janet Mackenzie, ed., *At the Typeface: Selections from the Newsletter of the Victorian Society of Editors, Society of Editors (Victoria) Inc., 2005***

**Softback, 340pp. index 16 pages**

**ISBN 0 646 45165 0**

**RRP \$30.00**

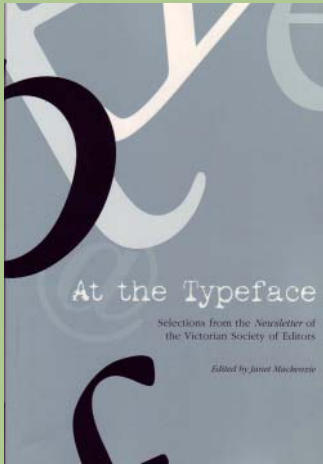
*At the Typeface* provokes many reactions; among them are interest, amusement, and envy. Envy? Oh, yes. How wonderful would it have been to be a member of the Victorian Society of Editors throughout its existence since 1970? And how fortunate are those who live in Victoria where so many of the legends of editing and publishing live/d and work/ed and therefore were able to speak at Society meetings. *At the Typeface* is a selection of contributions to the Society's monthly *Newsletter* over its 35-year life and is published by the Society of Editors (Victoria) Inc.

As its editor, Janet Mackenzie notes, 'The Society has always had a wide range of interests, multi-talented members and distinguished guests; it has long been a meeting point, in its modest way, for Melbourne's intellectual and cultural life'. And it shows! Wherever one opens the book and dips in one finds something to delight and provoke. Mackenzie acknowledges the rich lodes she had available to mine and regrets the gems that had to be omitted.

The book is arranged in twenty sections, each containing an average of seven contributions. The back cover lists 48 contributors — and they are only the famous ones. Many others have written for the *Newsletter* and are included in this collection; and all contributions are of interest and value. There are, of course, no GDEs (gratuitous design elements), although there is reference to them in several contributions. My single negative comment is that the binding of the review copy is coming unstuck in places, but that may well be because of my frequent turning to the detailed table of contents and the excellent index.

There are authors whose work one has read, admired, even loved, talking about their relationships with editors: George Turner, Helen Garner, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Alex Miller, Stephen Murray-Smith and many others. Editors reveal their role in an author's process and defend their profession against (ill-informed) public criticism. The ongoing question 'What does an editor do?' is answered in myriad ways, comprehensively in the list 'Qualities Desirable in an Editor' (November 1972, reprinted November 1984), wittily in the poem 'What we learned from the course' (June 1991), and completely without exaggeration or prejudice, in 'The Publishing Hierarchy' (October 1980) where small liberties are taken with superhero cartoons.

Many of the contributions are reports of presentations by speakers at the Society's meetings. They vary in comprehensiveness, but all manage to give the taste of the talk; scribes/reporters are recognised by name or



initials. Sometimes speakers released the written text of their speech to the Society and so provide the full and very satisfying repast, whether it be Lee White's history of becoming (continuous present) an editor, Nick Hudson's inimitable account of his role in the *Spycatcher* saga — one of the rare occasions when publishing became front-page news, or Janet Mackenzie's historical overview of Australian publishing and the role of the Society over 25 years.

Few issues of importance to editors are omitted. Readers will find reports of seminars on publishing economics; a well-argued paper on gendered language by the editor herself (in a section of excellent contributions to that debate); various views of whether or why there are too many books on the market; the role of multinationals; working with 'the corporates'; university presses; publishing for children; independent publishers; and the impact of changes in information and communications technologies. As the preface notes, the selection concentrates on 'articles that have enduring significance for editing and publishing'. Just as at conferences, one's enthusiasm for the profession is reinvigorated by being exposed to good ideas, sound arguments and outstanding individuals. When launching *At the Typeface*, Bob Sessions, Publishing Director at Penguin Books described it as 'the most useful book that could be read or given to anyone who is interested in knowing what the business of book publishing in Australia is all about'.

Appropriately, in a profession in which editors are too often described as 'invisible', the collection gives due recognition to people who have earned the respect of the industry. A section of obituaries and recollections acknowledges editors, publishers and proofreaders. What strikes me is the enormous warmth and fondness with which they are remembered. The people who have written for the *Newsletter* are a very decent bunch; they willingly share memories, ideas, jokes and advice, and they do it with generosity of word and spirit. In another section, winners of the Barbara Ramsden Award and the Beatrice Davis Fellowship talk about what these awards meant for their careers. Broader categories of literary awards are also discussed. And there are tributes to the careers and contributions of Honorary Life Members.

*At the Typeface* is, in addition, a book of prophecy. Long-time editor of the *Newsletter*, John Bangsund, first proposed the formation of a national society of editors in 'A Modest Proposal' (April 1979); CASE began in 1998 and its successor IPEd morphed into existence in 2005. Speakers, among them Penguin's Brian Johns in 1981, are reported as having advised editors over the years that they should become more media/marketing/accounting savvy — a point reiterated by several speakers at the 2005 National Editors' Conference, 'Editing in Context'.

Peppered throughout the text are boxed 'quotable quotes' which successive *Newsletter* editors have incorporated. The quoted include G. B. Shaw, Hilary McPhee, Amanda Lohrey, Society members, and anon. Many commemorate moments when discussions of editing have made it into the newspapers; they lend external authority to the issues discussed in the *Newsletter*. There are jokes, famous last words, and a running gag of

particular interest to Victorian members, recalling the low cost (and the quality of the wine) of the monthly dinners.

I cannot conclude this review without mentioning (again) John Bangsund, whose spirit pervades the collection. His [self-]reflection on winning the Barbara Ramsden Award is a delight, while I laughed out loud at his break-out quote from October 1983. 'I've never met an editor who commonly misuses the Third Aorist Pejorative. Have you? Don't be shy about saying so. The *Newsletter* exists for full and frank discussion of such things.'

At a party I told an acquaintance I was writing a review of a collection of articles from the Victorian Society of Editors' *Newsletter* and that I was finding it fascinating reading. You could see the disbelief in the doubtful smile and raised eyebrows. Non-editors just don't get it, do they? Any editor would love *At the Typeface*. And I dare suggest that many non-editors (more discriminating than my acquaintance) will enjoy this book's fascination with words and usage, its insights into publishing, its erudite discussion of the many facets of writing, editing and publishing—and the delightful whimsicality which pervades it.

[back](#)

[next](#)