

Editors Bronwyn Mehan, Linda Godfrey and Julie Chevalier from SPINELESS WONDERS tell us about commissioning writing.

Q: Spineless Wonders publishes collections and anthologies of short stories, microfiction and prose poetry. How do you find the authors?

We've published seventeen books, nine by individual authors and eight anthologies, which feature the work of over 150 writers. When we see writing that interests us, in print, online literary journals, blogs and anthologies, we follow the author up. We're interested in experimental short fiction and new voices. We value recommendations from editors, authors and academics who teach creative writing. We invite submissions to our annual writing competitions, *The Carmel Bird Short Fiction* and *The Joanne Burns Microlit Awards*. These are judged by respected writers and editors such as Sophie Cunningham, Carol Jenkins and Amanda Lohrey.

Q: Do you commission books?

For a small niche press like Spineless Wonders, finding up-front fees to commission authors is challenging. We're fortunate to have received grants from the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts to cover the costs of commissioning editors and writers for *The Great Unknown* and *Cracking the Spine: ten Australian stories and how they were written*. With increased sales we hope to commission more publications.

Q: When commissioning, are you looking for something specific?

It varies, Angela Meyer created *The Great Unknown* in homage to 1960s classic American TV show, *The Twilight Zone*. 'In the past few years,' Meyer told Readings¹, 'I've really fallen in love with Rod Serling's spooky – and often overtly political – masterpiece of a show. We decided the stories should have some connection to Australia. It is, after all, a rich setting for the strange and macabre, and an interesting (perhaps, at this time, horrifying?) place to reflect on socially and culturally.' Meyer invited writers she admired, and judged submissions for the Carmel Bird Short Fiction Award. 'Invited authors were chosen,' Meyer said, 'because they can tell a story, and many of them explore dark, mysterious or forward-thinking themes in their work, though often with subtlety.'

Q: *Cracking the Spine: ten short Australian stories and how they were written* was edited by Julie Chevalier and Bronwyn Mehan. How did you decide on which authors to include?

A story followed by an essay or exegesis about the author's writing process meant we had room for only ten authors. 'The book needed a range of styles as well as to illustrate the different ways writers reflect on their work,' Mehan says, 'from the academic essay analysing the influence of other texts (Maria Takolander) and art forms (Patrick West), to debates about genre (Rjurik Davidson), form (Ryan O'Neill) and the ethics confronting writers (Michael Giacometti and Jennifer Mills), through to reflections on the creative process (Marion Halligan and Andy Kissane) and the craft of writing (Claire Aman and Tony Birch).'

Chevalier explains, 'First, we selected contributors according to short story genre or form. We were looking for pieces that would excite the reader and invite discussion. Geographical location of the author played a part in this selection, as did gender.'

'Next,' Mehan says, 'we invited these authors to send stories, with a pitch for the accompanying essay. We knew we wanted 'An Australian Short Story' from Ryan O'Neill. Ryan had written extensively about the history of experimental Australian short fiction, including for our blog, *The Column*, so we were fairly sure what he'd send as an accompanying essay.'

Q You host two writing competitions. How does this selection process differ from commissioning?

This process has two parts. First, the editorial committee decides on a theme (sometimes it's unthemed) or parameters like word length or a specific requirement; then they put the word out to writers to submit. The culling is blind, the judge and anthology editors read the pieces and choose a long list. Writing is considered on its literary merit and whether it will fit into the specified theme or with general themes that may be emerging from the entries. The judge and editors meet for an intense and lively discussion to hash out the short list. If we can't decide, we'll read the writing out loud, listening for rhythm, cadence and story. From the short list, the judge decides the top three entries and the final selection for publication.

Parallel to this process, we invite guest authors to contribute to the collection.

An additional frisson to our microlit anthologies is the chance to have the work recorded as audio or displayed on screens in public places, for example, in Federation Square at the 2014 Melbourne Writers Festival. The audio and audio-visual platforms add additional criteria to our selection process since some contributions will work better as audio or on screen to be read by passers-by, than others. Some pieces will really only work on the page. Ideally, the resulting anthology will reflect a good mix of all of these factors.

Once the selection process is complete, entries are divided between the editors and we contact each finalist to begin the editing process. It's a condition of entry to our competitions that contributions to the anthology, even the winning entry, may be subject to editing. We contact those who were unsuccessful to thank them for their time and energy in submitting to our anthology call out and encourage them to enter again.

Q. So what's next, will we see more anthologies?

Michael McGirr is judging stories submitted for this year's *Carmel Bird Award*. Next year's fiction anthology will be crime-themed and our judge, Zane Lovitt, will be looking for likely suspects from amongst the *Carmel Bird Short Fiction Award* entries as well as inviting some of his favourite writers to contribute. We've made an early start on the 2015 *joanne burns Micro-lit Award*, which will be judged by Kirsten Tranter. The theme is Out of Place. Finalists and invited authors will be published in the anthology, with a chance to have their work screened during a writers' festival. Entries close 21st December.

More on www.shortaustralianstories.com.au

References

1. <http://www.readings.com.au/news/the-story-of-my-book-the-great-unknown>



Julie Chevalier



Linda Godfrey



Bronwyn Mehan

