



GALVANISING FORCES

Diana Giese considers the contribution to Australian publishing by Brian Johns and Kathy Bail as revealed in interviews recorded for the Library's Oral History Collection

Take two oral history tapes that slice into two very different periods, the 1970s and the 1990s. Listen to two voices, one a young woman's, the other a mature man's. Then note the similarities: the enthusiasm that quickens the pace so the interview bounds along, the exclamations of pleasure, the superlatives. Remark the eloquence with which they describe doing jobs they truly love. 'Exciting' is a word that recurs.

These are the voices of two of Australia's most skilled and influential publishers, Brian Johns and Kathy Bail. Both were recorded for the

National Library of Australia's Oral History Collection. Of their effect on the publishing scene, one could quote from Johns: 'So much depends on the aliveness, the alertness and the concerns of individuals.'

Brian Johns went to Penguin Books in 1979, after a successful career as a journalist, and as a Senior Policy Adviser to both the Whitlam and Fraser governments. In 1987, he became Managing Director of Special Broadcasting Service, and in 1992 Chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Authority. He is now Managing Director of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Kathy Bail worked on the *Independent Monthly*, moved in 1993 to be Editor of the Australian edition of *Rolling Stone* and then to *HQ* magazine. She is currently Deputy Editor of the revamped *Bulletin*. In 1996, she edited *DIY Feminism*, a collection of stories by young Australian women published by Allen & Unwin.

Johns was one of the galvanising forces behind the new Australian

writing and publishing of the 1970s. When he arrived at Penguin, the company published fewer than 20 Australian books; by the time he left, they were producing over 200. Johns speaks of how people were empowered by the Whitlam era's tapping into ideas, to formulate new policies, build new structures. There was, he says:

a burgeoning of the arts ... film, theatre, literature. We were building what in total could amount to a creative infrastructure ... I insisted that

(top left) Brian Johns, AO, Managing Director, Australian Broadcasting Corporation
Photograph courtesy of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation

(top right) Kathy Bail, Deputy Editor of the *Bulletin*
Photograph courtesy of Australian Consolidated Press

we should be curious and immediate—and we were wanting to provide a platform for discussion ... The enemy in this country is neither the Left nor the Right ... the real enemy are the indifferent—and that's what we wanted to challenge with our non-fiction list.

He came directly from a job as Chief of Staff at the *Australian*:

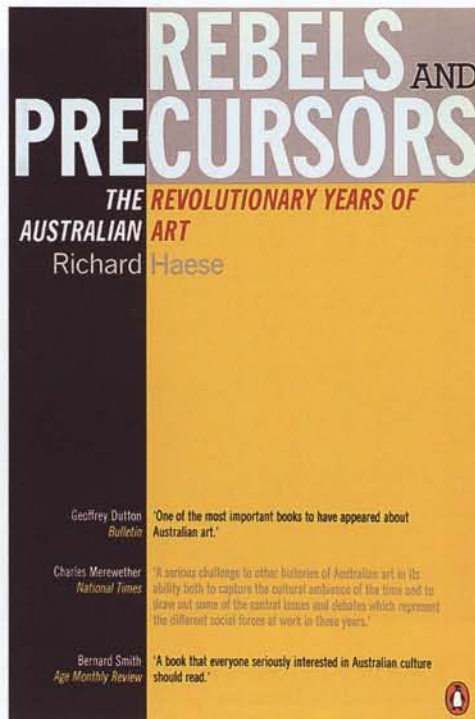
I was used to a lot of ideas ... publishing is about ideas. Good ideas have their own force ... I was hungry for books and manuscripts ... but I was impatient with the slowness of publishing.

What he did was speed it up. For instance: he put an editor with Bruce Grant, Foreign Correspondent for the *Age*, to write a book on the Vietnamese boat people. 'They did it day by day. It was written and produced in 10 weeks. Then we sold it around the world.'

When Johns arrived, however, Penguin was an international company 'in name only'. Penguin UK needed to sell their books to Australia and New Zealand and South Africa, but they 'didn't feel the same impulse to buy our books for the UK ... So it was failure to have that interdependence that was an inhibiting factor on the Australian market and Australian publishing.' With his team, he set out to discover more Australian non-fiction, novels, children's books. 'One of the earliest challenges at Penguin was to get people to "think Australian". The money was being made by the British books—because Australian books had neither a big domestic market nor substantial overseas sales. 'We changed that. We said: "Right, we'll set the prices, we'll be bullish about the prices, and we will work to get print runs up to make the margins.'" After a few years, the margins matched those of the British books: 'There was an economic incentive to "think Australian".' This extended to seizing the moment. He sees 'publishing sense' as 'what is going to sell, what is going to work—and knowing why ...

the ability to assess quality and relevance and what's appropriate to the time'.

One of his major successes was Richard Haese's *Rebels and Precursors: The Revolutionary Years of Australian Art* (1988). Gazing at one of the manuscript's many photographs, 'two beautiful young boys', Arthur Boyd and John Perceval, Johns realised that 'these were the people who made Australian art'. Notable fiction writers such as Thea Astley and Jessica Anderson were already published by



Cover of *Rebels and Precursors: The Revolutionary Years of Australian Art* by Richard Haese (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1988)

Penguin, but in hardback. Johns decided to publish straight to paperback, an idea later taken up by Penguin internationally. Blanche d'Alpuget's *Turtle Beach* was one of the first products, and a big seller. He also published David Ireland and Murray Bail. He sought and sold short stories.

Throughout the interview, he speaks with warmth of the collaborative nature of publishing, and the advantages of working with people 'you respect and like'. He pays

tribute to editors who both fostered authors and curbed 'some of the mad enthusiasms that I had'. He enthuses about his 'engagement with people. I've met some publishers who really didn't enjoy the company of the authors. I enjoyed the company of the authors; I enjoyed the company of the sales forces; I enjoyed the marketing ... the whole'.

This sense of community extends to readers. 'One of the great attractions of publishing was the diversity. You have a diversity of view; you have a diversity of interest; you have a curiosity.' What makes a great publishing house, he asserts, is 'a spirit of generosity. Of its nature it should want other people to succeed. It wants to extend audiences.' Overall, 'we were open. We were very, very open.'

Kathy Bail joined the *Independent Monthly* as Max and Jennie Suich set it up. She was attracted to a publication independent of both the Murdoch and Packer stables. She welcomed the opportunity to work with some of Australia's best writers, editors, artists and illustrators, across the political spectrum. She was 26: 'it was a great opportunity to do an apprenticeship.'

She says of her job on this quality tabloid: 'You had to be a bit of an all-rounder ... I did a bit of writing and interviewing, commissioning some stories, doing some copyediting.' Her main interest, however, was building up relationships with younger writers. One of these was John Birmingham, whom she worked with later on *Rolling Stone*.

Throughout the tape, she emphasises the primary importance of the editing process, which she describes as 'intensive':

The *Independent* would rarely commission a story that would just come in and go into the paper. It would tend to go through several versions. I think that's when I first learnt that the relationship between an editor and a writer can be really

productive. A story goes backwards and forwards and you get that opportunity to refine it. Then you end up getting exceptional results.

This quest for excellence was made worthwhile by readers who 'weren't afraid of a long story'. They could extend to 8000 words.

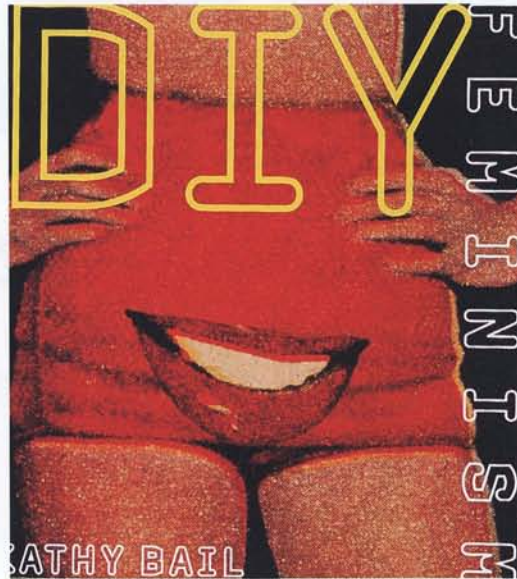
There was an edgy quality to working on an independent paper. Things were different from jobs on publications that are 'going to be there forever in some form'. Because the Suichs were putting their own money into the *Independent*, its small staff of eight was committed to making every issue the best possible. 'It made a difference if we sold an extra 10 pages of advertising,' says Bail. To be successful, she came to understand that 'distribution was important, that advertising was important, that having the right stories and knowing how to present them, having the right covers—all of these elements required thought and effort'. She watched Suich draw on a large pool of outside contributors, then 'bring all of these diverse voices together and put them into one convincing package'.

Her 'apprenticeship' paid off when Bail went in 1993 to edit *Rolling Stone*, and four years later, *HQ* magazine. On *Rolling Stone*, she was regularly in touch, via phone or email, with the rich American parent magazine, and its large staff. The Australians were working on a much smaller scale 'and we tried to inject a local character'—but they were also conscious of being part of a magazine that 'stood up on the international stage'. For *HQ*, she again borrowed from overseas, particularly the USA and UK, then recruited Australian writers 'to get a sort of hybrid product'. As Editor of *HQ*, 'It's great to be able to do a magazine that was started here, that has an international perspective ... I could hand this magazine to anyone, anywhere and feel confident. The standard of writing is high. The design's really strong.'

On her arrival at *HQ*, Bail says, 'I suddenly found myself inside one of

the biggest media empires', Packer's Australian Consolidated Press. She immediately started to use its resources. She set up a web site with ninemsn, Pty Ltd and found working with this a challenge beyond the structures and formats of traditional magazine publishing. 'It's so fluid. It's changing all the time.'

HQ is a bimonthly magazine, but the web site can be updated daily. They opened it one night a week for a chat about books, with a host. 'People can log on and talk about what books they've been reading. It's a mixture of



Cover of *D.I.Y. Feminism* edited by Kathy Bail (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996)

gossip and analysis and comment.' Bail has a clear idea of how this enhanced her brief.

You try and build a community around the magazine, and it becomes a meeting place for different people. Whether you do it online or whether a magazine is being picked up by different people in a café, like-minded souls will find their way to this thing called *HQ*.

The interactivity of the web site is a crucial step forward in publishing. Says Bail now:

The agreement with ninemsn on the site ended when I moved to the

Bulletin. But it had pointed to possibilities. Communication has got to be two way. We have to inform and entertain readers and make them feel they're part of a publication.

What does she make of an industry in which the boundaries between media are collapsing, where newspaper supplements differ from magazines only in the quality of their paper, where lifestyle books on food and gardens are becoming more like magazines, and where more and more people turn to the Internet for news and information? 'We're told over and over again that people don't have time, and you've got to provide a digest, condense the information,' she says. She likens the instant availability of media fodder to junk food. 'I'm going in exactly the opposite direction in every publication I've worked on ... there will always be a group of people who will want to read more in-depth stories.' Her view of editing is that 'we'll do the hard work for you, and present what's good ... You've got to be leading; you've got to be out front. It's risky, but you've got to say: "This is where I think things are moving, and this is what I think we should

be taking note of."' For *HQ*'s 30-something urban audience, both men and women, she commissioned pieces which added depth to recent newspaper stories, and covered popular culture and technology issues, 'not new products, what you can consume—rather what it all means'.

Bail's media career developed with the rise of electronic publishing. 'I've always had a very DIY attitude to media ... when it comes down to it, you can actually lay out a publication yourself.' That's what she did with her book, *DIY Feminism*, 'to make feminism seem exciting and relevant to a younger generation of Australian women'. It was put together after-hours on *Rolling Stone*'s computers. Its funky, in-your-face design was deliberate:

I knew if we didn't get the design and packaging right, those ideas wouldn't

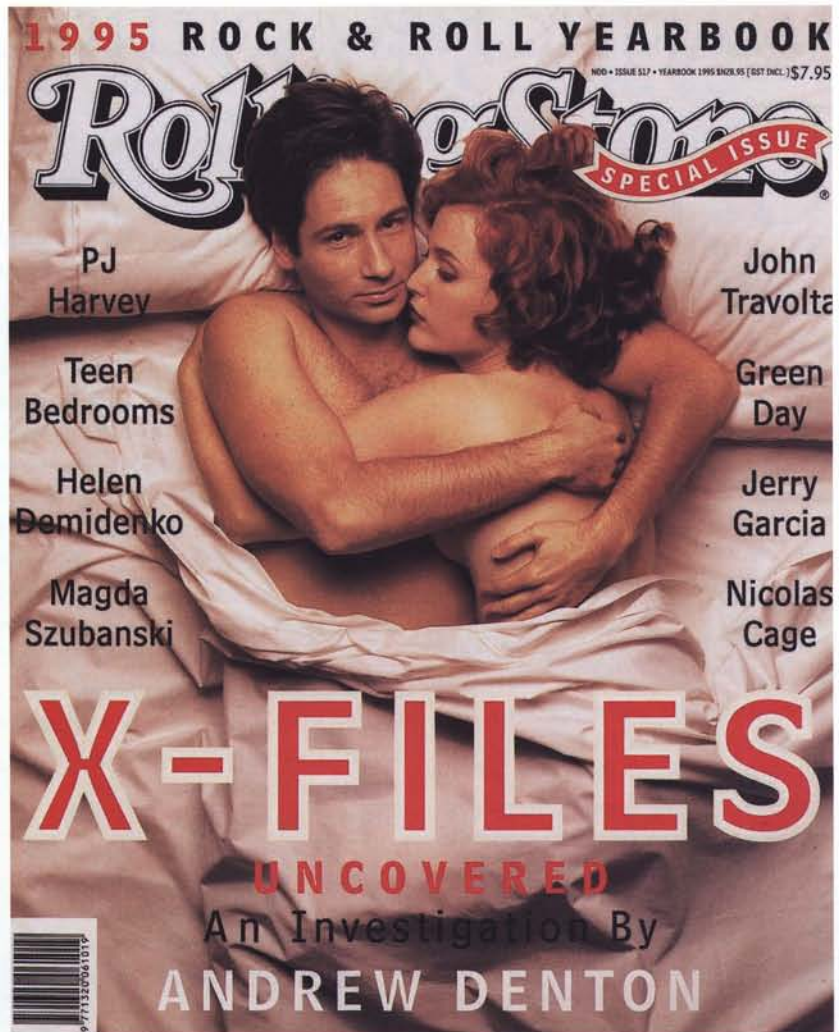
Cover of *Rolling Stone's* 1995 Yearbook issue
Courtesy of Australian Consolidated Press

reach the audience it was aimed at. I couldn't really separate the style of it and the content.

The challenge at the moment is working out where the intersections of print and digital media are going to be. How are they going to complement one another? I can't imagine in the future working on just a magazine ... We're going to be juggling the two things ... a lot of information is going to move online.

I interviewed Bail as part of a group of young women in publishing. They included Sophie Cunningham at Allen & Unwin, Jane Palfreyman at Random House and Julie Gibbs at Penguin. Johns was interviewed along with his peers Laurie Muller at the University of Queensland Press, Ian Templeman, ex-Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Text's Diana Gribble and Patrick Gallagher at Allen & Unwin. All have insights into the rapidly-changing world of publishing and communications, in the midst of the global electronic revolution. Kathy Bail, eyes firmly on the future, crystallises two themes that recur, echoing through all these tapes: 'Books are still so beautiful ... the thing is, they last. A few copies will always survive.' And: 'With all this talk of globalisation, maybe there is a swing back, maybe you want to put your roots down and do something that does matter in your own community.'

DIANA GIESE, who has worked in book publishing and journalism in London and Sydney, is an oral historian engaged by the National Library of Australia to conduct interviews on publishing in Australia



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