



# Me and Publishing

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Author

'Me and publishing.' (And don't anyone correct that!) I wonder if I can possibly find enough to say that's of interest about my 'publishing career'. (And, of course, that's not 'my career in publishing', but 'my career, being published'.)

Let me start in the mid-1960s. I was a young English teacher, frustrated that I was reading all these wonderful modern poems, and yet, when it came to the classroom, I was made to teach pretty dry and usually old poems to my students. If the poet we were dealing with in class was actually still *alive*, that was a major fillip to our spirits. (We've heard the question, 'What do you have to do to be a poet?' Answer: 'Be dead'.)

So I started putting together what I saw as 'my ideal anthology'. I included the major poets and poems of the canon, certainly: I had had a conservative training as an English teacher, and so I didn't even question the central position of the canon in the curriculum. But the collection came to consist overwhelmingly of the modern and the contemporary, those poets who were alive - and kicking.

And one day in 1967 I walked into the offices of Oxford University Press (OUP) in Cape Town and presented my collection. I knew absolutely nothing about how to get a book published - but I knew that I wanted my anthology to be published and I knew that OUP was respectable.

Fortunately for me, the office I walked into had sitting behind the desk a man who clearly knew his poetry and who understood something of what I was on about. It was David Philip, then the editorial manager of OUP. Working with him was an ex-fellow-student of mine, John Burn Wood (who was to work closely with me on the manuscript and subsequently the book).

My anthology was read by two

practising teachers: one conservative, and one progressive. The more progressive teacher said: 'Yes, this is wonderful, this is wonderful, what a pity it'll never make it.' The more conservative teacher gave us the better advice. She said, 'You'll never get this past the teachers on the prescribed book committee. It's got far too many modern poems in it. But, if you do this and this, maybe they won't notice.' What she suggested was splitting the book into two parts. Part one would consist of all the 'standard' poems, from Chaucer right through to the mid-twentieth-century poets, like Ted Hughes. Then part two could consist of all the other poems, poems 'not really meant for prescription', but, rather, for the teacher's, the class's, the individual student's private reading and enjoyment.

By about mid-1968 we had shaped and made **Inscapes**, as the collection was to be called. (It was John Burn Wood who came up with the title - and, also, he who served as the duffel-coated model on the negative-print cover.) We delayed publication until early 1969, for a positively shameful, but very sensible, reason. The collection had masses of Wilfred Owen poems in it. Wilfred Owen died one week before the end of World War One, on 4 November 1918. I'm not sure about the situation now, but in the late-60s you had to pay permission fees to all living poets (obviously), and for fifty years after a poet's death. That meant that on 5 November 1968 Wilfred Owen would go out of copyright and into

the public domain, and, from that date on, all the Wilfred Owen poems would cost me... nothing! Clever David Philip thought of that, not me.

So **Inscapes** came out in 1969. That original version went on being sold year after year: in fact, it's still in print. In 2003, OUP sold three whole copies,



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surely the last three copies in the warehouse. Overall, it has sold 201 000 copies.

I did two other collections with OUP at that time (poems for younger readers and one-act plays). And OUP has stayed my publisher ever since - though there's a story to come about that.

Publishing then was a very friendly, gentle preoccupation - and exchanges between authors and staff were very pally. I used to do some reading and reporting on unsolicited manuscripts for OUP, and one day, after I'd been doing some proof-reading as well, I got a note from the staff member in charge of me. (I should mention that we'd just included Siegfried Sassoon's poem *Everyone sang* in a collection; and that poem has the line in it: 'O but Everyone was a bird'.) The note said:

Dear Robin  
It's really rather jolly  
To discover as we do  
That our Vital Source of Lolly  
Is so good at reading too!  
It's on-on to publication  
Now the comma-check is klaar;  
For your patient emendation  
O but Everyone says ta.

I replied:

Dear Sally  
Thank you for your charming pome  
Sorry about the accompanying tome  
It really is rather a bore  
That I enjoy doing this sort of chore  
I'd much rather not  
Have to work such a lot  
And, what's more,  
(My having written and your having read  
my report)  
I4C  
U2B  
asking me  
up 4T  
at OUP  
- a pleasure I can manage any Friday at four.

I'm not sure that authors and publishers indulge in that kind of thing any more! (And, maybe, more's the pity)

I had written the above, when I happened, just the other day, to get an email from the publisher of Spearhead, who is working on a book of mine at the moment. It read:

*Dear Robin*

*I have not yet registered the Model Author Award (the MAA); even so, you can be certain that you are The FIRST (and probably the ONLY and LAST) recipient of the currently proposed but as yet non-existent award. I duly institute the award - the MAA.*

Of course, I simply had to reply:

*First, I'd like to thank my mother, and my aunts, and my sister...et cetera, et cetera.*

In 1971 David Philip left Oxford University Press and Marie Philip left what was then Longmans, and they started David Philip Publisher. And I kind of went with them. Or, half of me went with them.

I spent seven months of 1971 in the United Kingdom, looking at drama-in-education and theatre-in-education. A lot of my work was in towns and cities in the Midlands, but I was based in London, so I spent quite a bit of time on British Rail. And, I suppose because I wasn't hearing the sounds in my ears, I started scribbling on pieces of paper little snippets and snatches of South African English...or Sow Thefricun Inngliss. When I got back to Cape Town, going as Rawbone Malong, I put them together into the volume called **Ah Big Yaws?**, and offered it to Marie and David Philip.

They worked from home at that stage, and their house in Scott Road in Claremont, always full of laughter anyway, now had people wandering around it, puzzling over pieces of paper, trying out loud to work through the phonetic nonsense I'd concocted, and then shrieking with laughter as recognition dawned.

We had the theatre photographer Brian Astbury take a series of wonderful photographs of the actor Yvonne Bryceland and me, saying some of these words. And I noted down each expression and which photograph went with it. And all of that went to David and Marie. And somehow the list of 'which went with which' got lost! So now more wonderful hours were spent the other way round: looking at each photograph and trying to divine which word or expression it matched.

It was very much a home business, a 'cottage industry' (their house is called Arderne Cottage), and I spent happy hours in their garage wrapping up parcels of books to be despatched to bookshops. (Authors definitely don't do that with their publishers any more.) Imagine our sense of reward when that formidable lady of letters who presided over (I think it was the back page of) the **Sunday Times** Molly Reinhardt, reviewed the book and gave us our cover-tagline from then on by saying: 'This is unquestionably the funniest book I have read.'

**Ah Big Yaws?** has stayed in print ever since, selling a whole 44 copies in 2003 (though that was on a warehouse sale, so all I got out of those 44 copies was R13.21 - don't even try to do the arithmetic). In all, over 32 years, it sold 27 500 copies. I got used to encountering the book in people's loos.

Let's jump to the mid-80s: you'll remember, a turbulent time in South Africa. To phrase it oddly: I was by then miserably unhappy about the continued success of **Inscapes**. **Inscapes** came out in 1969. It was two years later, in 1971, that the first collection in English by a black South African poet was published: Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali's **Sounds of a cowhide drum**, to be followed by the most wonderful surge of new South African poetry, mainly by black South African poets. (A little later, post-Independence in 1980, a similar kind of burgeoning was to occur in Zimbabwe.) And none of this was being put in front of South African students, 15-or-so years later.

So I asked OUP for a revision. Of course they were aware now that they had a good money-spinner in **Inscapes**, and so were reluctant to do anything to disturb this particular laying goose. Also, long after David Philip had left, the person behind his desk was a very different kind of person, with a different political agenda. I was living in Swaziland then, in the mid-80s, and there began, I'm afraid, a fairly protracted, long-distance, low-level, generally quite polite row between us - made bearable by having a very committed commissioning editor as intermediary, who couldn't say so but who I was pretty sure was 'on my side'.

OUP did agree to the revision, but only by keeping everything as it was, and simply tacking on a part three, containing mainly the more recent South African material. I went along with that, though I saw it as



ghettoising the black South African poets, creating a kind of poetry bantustan.

After I'd done my selection work, the PowerThat Was at OUP wasn't happy to publish the collection with two particular poems in it. I wouldn't remove them. Impasse. We also came to be at loggerheads about the new cover I was keen to have. I wanted to use a happy Peter Magubane photograph of a boy running along a township street with an iron hoop. That photograph did not find favour on the executive floor of OUP. I decided to 'play hardball' and wouldn't budge on either issue. I'm pleased I decided on that course (an unusual one for me), because the book was eventually published with the poems I wanted in and with the cover I wanted. It came out as **New inscapes** in 1986.

I had one further serious dispute with OUP; so serious that I wanted to take the anthology away from them and give it to David Philip Publishers (David tells me the 's' was added in 1976). However, I couldn't do that, because I had been locked into my arrangement with OUP by a very shrewdly put-together original contract. Irony of ironies, that contract had, of course, been drawn up by none other than David Philip, in those days long ago when he was still in charge at OUP!

Happily, with another change of top staff, all of those issues were resolved, and I very happily still have two main publishers, both Oxford University Press and David Philip Publishers, now in the amalgamated guise of New Africa Books.

At the time **New inscapes** was published, though, it did look for a while as if I was wrong and 'the other side' was going to win out. When the new anthology was submitted to the various education departments, the verdict that came back from the then Transvaal Education Department was that the anthology would never be prescribed by that department because it was

far too radical politically. Did the man in the grey suit and grey shoes who said that use the words 'over my dead body'? **New inscapes** has stayed in print, has sold 270 000 copies, and was prescribed by all the old education departments, including the dreaded Transvaal Education Department. I wonder if the man is still alive. (I think I need to make an amendment to that statistic: as far as I recollect, it was never prescribed by the Bantu Education Department, or Department of Education and Training, or whatever its shameful name was.)

In 1997 it was Oxford University Press who approached me and asked for a revision of **New inscapes**. I happily

responded by producing **Worldscapes**, a collection that I am extremely proud of. In this, the 'canon' is reduced still further, to the first fifty pages, and the other 220 pages are devoted to poems from...just everywhere. I had become very conscious of the many different Englishes there are all over the world, and I wanted this new anthology, the last of the old millennium and the first of the new, to reflect that. So I said the following in the introduction:

*'Of far greater concern to me [than the canon] has been that the anthology might serve to open up students' experience. By this I mean their experience of English as much as their world view. We need to be aware that there is a world out there. We*

*need to know that English is a language written and spoken by many different sorts of people. I have therefore thought it important to cast the selection-net wide. I have not included works translated from other languages, but I have included poems that are distinctively African, African American, American, Australian, British, Canadian, Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, South African, and West Indian-British (to mention them alphabetically). Together they make up an excitingly-varied experience of life and of the ways English is currently being used.'*

Publishing **Worldscapes** gave me what was probably one of the most devastating shocks of my life. Because of the 'newness'

## Books written or compiled by Robin Malan

\*(as assistant editor) **English alive: a literary magazine for high schools 1967-70** (South African Council for English Education Western Cape Branch (SACEE), Cape Town, 1967-70.)

**Inscapes: a collection of relevant verse** (Oxford U.P., Cape Town, 1969.)

**Outridings: a collection of verse for the first year in the high school** (Oxford U.P., Cape Town, 1972.)

**Play workshop: ten one-act plays** (Oxford U.P., Cape Town, 1972.)

(as Rawbone Malong) **Ah big yaws?: a guard to Sow Theffricun Innglisch** (D. Philip, Cape Town, 1972.)

**Drama-Teach: drama-in-education and theatre for young people** (D. Philip, Cape Town, 1973.)

**New Inscapes: a collection of verse** (Oxford U.P., Cape Town, 1986.)

\***Ourselves in Southern Africa: an anthology of Southern African writing** (Macmillan, London, 1988; St Martin's Press, New York, 1989.)

**Explorings: a collection of poems for the young people of southern Africa** (D. Philip, Cape Town, 1988.)

\***Small portraits of a people: selections from some letters** (Africasouth Books, Mbabane, 1990, privately published.)

**New outridings** (Oxford U.P., Cape Town, 1993.)

**Being here: modern short stories from Southern Africa** (D. Philip, Cape Town, 1994.)

**New beginnings: short stories from southern Africa** (Oxford U.P., Cape Town, 1995.)

**Poetry works 1: a workbook anthology for students and teachers** (D. Philip, Cape Town, 1995.)

\***English alive: an annual anthology of writing from high schools and colleges in Southern Africa 1995-2004** (South African Council for English Education Western Cape Branch (SACEE), Cape Town, 1995-2004.)

**The distance remains, and other plays** (D. Philip, Cape Town, 1996.)

\***Introduction and notes to educational edition of Richard Rive: 'Buckingham Palace', District Six** (D. Philip, Cape Town, 1996.)

**My African World: poems for younger readers** (D. Philip, Cape Town, 1996.)

**Poetry works 2: a workbook anthology for students and teachers** (D. Philip, Cape Town, 1997.)

(abridged by Robin Malan) Margaret McCord: **The calling of Katie Makanya** (D. Philip, Cape Town, 1997; translated into isiXhosa by Pamela Maseko: **Ubizo luka-Katie Makhanya**, 1997.)

**The essential Nelson Mandela** (D. Philip, Cape Town, 1997.)

**The essential Steve Biko** (D. Philip, Cape Town, 1998.)

**Worldscapes: a collection of verse** (Oxford U.P., Cape Town, 1997.)

**The sound of new wings** (Maskew Miller Longman, Cape Town, 1998.)

(with Jerome Damon, Rochelle Kapp, Mncedisi Mashigoane, Nokuthula Mazibuko, Colleen Moroukian, Khulile Nxumalo) **A poetry companion to Worldscapes and New inscapes** (Oxford U.P., Cape Town, 1998.)

(with Mncedisi Mashigoane) **Ways of dying - Study notes** (Oxford U.P., Cape Town, 1999.)

(with an introduction by Rochelle Kapp) **No place like and other short stories by southern African women writers** (D. Philip, Cape Town, 1999.)

**The pick of Snailpress poems** (D. Philip, Cape Town, 2000.)

\*(additional material by Robin Malan) for Richard Blunt, Daphne Paizee, Gaile Perkin, Mary-Louise Peires: **New successful English Grade 12** (Oxford U.P., Cape Town, 2002.)

\*(with Mncedisi Mashigoane) **Study notes for Zakes Mda: The heart of redness** (Oxford U.P., Cape Town, 2002, forthcoming 2004.)

(as Nibor Nalam) **High heels and hijack** (*Siyagruva Series*, New Africa Bks., Cape Town, 2002.)

(as Orbin Lamna, with Mteto Mzongwana, Onele Mfeketo) **Mom's taxi** (*Siyagruva Series*, New Africa Bks., Cape Town, 2003.)

(as Biron Alnam) **No problem, man!** (*Siyagruva Series*, New Africa Bks., Cape Town, 2003.)

(with Russell Kaschula, Colleen Moroukian, Anne Schlebusch, as Rusleen Malbusch) **Boy in da city** (*Siyagruva Series*, New Africa Bks., Cape Town, 2003.)

\*(with Shabbir Banoobhai, Isobel Dixon, Gus Ferguson, Malcolm Hacksley) **Tatamkhulu Afrika: Night Rider: selected poems** (Kwela and Snailpress, Cape Town, 2003.)

\***The South African impossible book quiz book!** (Spearhead, New Africa Bks., Cape Town, 2004.)

\*(with Colleen Moroukian, as Brion Mnala) **Namibian kwaito** (*Siyagruva Series*, New Africa Bks., Cape Town, 2004.)

\***The story of Lucky Simelane** (Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2005.)

\***Rebel Angel** (Junkets Publisher, Cape Town, 2005.)

\* Titles not available in Library Service stock.



or 'recentness' of the vast majority of the poets, and because fees had gone up, I knew the authors' permission fees were going to be steep. The usual arrangement is that the publisher pays those fees for the compiler, and then deducts them from royalties for however many years it takes to work them off. For a fella like me who has never had an account in his life and who pays cash for everything he buys, imagine what I felt when I was confronted by a royalty statement in 1998 that said my royalties for **Worldscapes** were: 'minus-42 000 Rand'! I owed someone R42 000. Happily, that was paid off within two years. In its short life, from 1998 to today, **Worldscapes** has sold 145 000 copies.

Finally, quick mention of two other publishers who have been great to work with.

First, I've just completed ten years of editing **English alive**, the annual anthology of writing from high schools and colleges in southern Africa. The publisher there is the South African Council for English Education (SACEE). That's been a very happy experience. Everyone involved in producing **English alive** has become a good friend; and I've had some wonderful exchanges and contact with young school-student writers.

And then, there's the pleasure I've had in working with New Africa Books, under Brian Wafawarowa, as the Series Editor of the *Siyagruva Series* of novels for South African teens. That has been - and continues to be - an enterprise that gives me the chance to seek out, find, and then walk alongside new young writers.

So, I've been involved with publishing for 37 years now. It might have been only 25. People sometimes speak of 'an extra lease of life', of 'borrowed time'. I had a pretty severe heart attack in 1992, of the sort that could have finished me off. I'm really glad it didn't, because, in the thirteen years since then, I've managed to do an amazing body of work: over 20 books. So, I have much cause to be thankful for these years - and

much cause to be thankful, too, for the productive pleasure I've had in working with excellent, forward-looking and pleasant publishers.

*Note: This article is based on a talk given to EDULIS, the Education Library & Information Service, in Bellville, 12 July 2004.*

