

## ACT LOCALLY

# Ashley Kalagian Blunt spends a year in the writing ecosphere

**H**ere's something I'm ashamed to admit: when I moved to Australia five years ago, I'd never read an Australian author. It wasn't a purposeful omission; I grew up in small-town Canada, but read mostly Americans and Brits.

It wasn't the move across the Pacific that changed my habits — it was my decision to pursue writing seriously. I spent my high school years writing an apocalyptic novel about killer bees from Mars (spoiler alert: everyone dies). At least I had enough sense not to send it to a publisher.

Newly settled in Sydney, I began to write a book I did plan to publish (no Martian bees involved). I assumed the quality of my writing was the only relevant factor in getting published. It wasn't, of course, and I learned that at an event at the NSW Writers' Centre. I'd thought my attendance would be a one-time only commitment: *I'll just spend a day learning about the publishing industry, then go home and get my book published.* Ah, the naivety.

I did learn a few industry tips that day but, more importantly, I was introduced to a cornucopia of local writers. This was my first awareness of what Walter Mason referred to as the 'writing ecosphere' in his article, 'How to Be a Literary Citizen' (*Newswrite* 222, August–September 2015).

Mason suggests ways to be a better literary citizen and support the writing community: buy new books — from local bookshops — and read them, subscribe to literary magazines, attend author events, be a fan and campaigner, and embrace generosity.



By the time Mason's article appeared in *Newswrite* a year ago, I'd at least started reading local authors. But his suggestions made me realise there was much more I could be doing, and maybe it would help me towards getting published, as it did for Mason. I decided to dedicate a year to following his advice: in effect, I'd give this 'supporting others' thing a try to see if it would pay off for me.

A lot of Mason's advice is straightforward and simple. I immediately subscribed to a few literary magazines I'd been reading online. Having their issues show up in my home as physical objects with heft and texture made their contents more memorable (especially compared to the endless blur of online reading). I got a better sense of what I might pitch to each and even did so successfully. I can only buy and read so many myself, however. A bigger challenge would be to get the non-writers I know interested in literary magazines.

I scrutinised my reading and shopping habits. On the list where I track my 'books read', year by year, I began to highlight the Australian authors in yellow. Over the last year, almost every entry has been as close in shade to golden wattle as Microsoft provides.

Now I specifically buy Australian authors. When I do read international authors, I get their books from the library. To increase the number of local books I could purchase, I started giving my favourite local authors' books as

gifts. Not sometimes, but for pretty much every gift I give.

When I mailed my sister an autographed copy of Zoë Norton Lodge's *Almost Sincerely*, she wrote to say, 'I adore that you had the author sign it for me. Even if I don't like it, that makes it a definite keeper!' She'd never had a signed copy before — maybe lots of people haven't.

Attending a lot of author events, usually one a week, has taught me what works for me. Let's be honest: I'm shy and am pretty sure people can see the word 'awkward' tattooed on my face. At the Sydney Writers' Festival, I often feel lost in the crowd, anonymous and disconnected. I find myself feeling much more encouraged at smaller author events. Book launches and talks with smaller crowds feel more intimate, like I'm part of a community, like these are people even I can talk to.

At library talks and bookshop readings there's much more opportunity to interact with authors. I've made some of my best connections this way including Walter Mason himself, who I first met at a book launch. But I've also been able to meet other attendees who are inspired by the same authors.

At one event, I met another writer who in turn introduced me to the fabulous Michelle Troxler (you may remember Troxler from a previous *Newswrite* article on running a successful writers' group, 'A Safe Place to Share and Shape Work', *Newswrite* 225, February–March 2016).

Joining one of Troxler's writing groups has helped me sharpen my skills while providing a monthly dose of inspiration.

The most confronting part of Mason's advice was to be a vocal fan and campaigner. Who was I to campaign for anything? Why would anyone listen to me? And what if 'campaigning' exposed me to some sort of criticism or backlash? It also felt intimidating to be genuine on social media, which is saturated with cynicism. The timid introvert in me cringed.

Mason describes the schedule of help and promotion he keeps, his Spreadsheet of Loving Kindness. I decided to try it for myself. There's a reason it's a spreadsheet, I discovered. It takes some organisation to pull off. It wasn't an organic process, but a plotted one. I compiled a list of people I knew who were doing great things and started going through it person by person.

This was time consuming. I often left it to the weekend, then scheduled a series of posts for the week. This did get me some social media engagement, and it was a great way to keep on top of all the interesting things my favourite people were doing. But scheduling my posts risked making them routine and predictable. Organisation stripped the spontaneity.

Another challenge was keeping my content interesting. Was I boring people? Mason advises us to 'bring some energy, enthusiasm and good ideas to helping get the word out', but after trying to squeeze my own writing in amongst work and events, my energy was flagging.

Another of Mason's key points is to embrace generosity, to 'be the fan you wish you had'. So, instead of giving up, I need to experiment with ways to bring more spontaneity and fun into my efforts. So, perhaps a spreadsheet isn't the right strategy for me. Much social media advice says the keys are being genuine and interacting with others. After training myself to do the campaigning, the next step seems to be making it spontaneous and interactive. It takes time and energy to find your voice and strike the right chord.

Thankfully there was none of the backlash or criticism I'd envisioned. If authors took offence at the number of exclamation marks I used to rave about their books or talks, none let me know.

One great move I made, both for myself and my campaigning efforts, was to join Toastmasters. I did so initially to develop my speaking skills so I could give captivating author talks, if given the opportunity. Participating regularly at my club, I've honed my abilities to speak about my own writing by exploring every aspect of it through many talks.

But there's a limit to how much you can talk about yourself (for most people, anyway). Toastmasters became the perfect forum to rave about — ahem, I mean campaign for — the great authors I'd discovered. It's no surprise that many of the motivated and introspective people who join are readers. At Toastmasters, I have a captive audience of readers, people outside the writing ecosphere who, like the old me, may only read big names and bestsellers because those are the books they're most likely to hear about, unless someone draws their attention to local greats.

At the heart of Mason's article was the idea that if you're aiming to get published, your efforts to support the

writing ecosphere might end up helping you, as they did for Mason himself. I'd love to report that after a year of taking his advice to heart, I ended up with a publishing contract.

I haven't, but what I've gained might be more valuable.

I've discovered a community of people I connect with, made wonderful friends, learned a lot and felt inspired. My passion ended up leading me to a job that I love. And I feel more at home in the world and confident in myself.

Even if a crystal ball with 99 per cent accuracy informed me I would never get my own manuscripts published, I would keep championing local authors' books and attending author events and subscribing to literary magazines. In writing this, there was no other way it could turn out than as a love letter to the Australian literary community.

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Ashley Kalagian Blunt has written for *Kill Your Darlings*, *Griffith Review* and *McSweeney's*, and is a Varuna Fellowship recipient. Her latest project is *How To be Australian: A memoir of eating Iced Vovos*. She performs stand-up and teaches public speaking. She is the program officer at the NSW Writers' Centre. Find her online at [clippings.me/](http://clippings.me/) akblunt and on Twitter @AKalagianBlunt.

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