



historycouncilnsw

From Research to Publication

Turning ideas into prize-winning history books

Newcastle Writers Festival masterclass presented by the History Council of NSW

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Overview](#)

[Our Speakers](#)

[Presentations](#)

[Panel session – chaired by Tanya Evans](#)

[Audience Q&A](#)

[Useful links:](#)

Overview

For many early career historians, researchers and students, the thought of turning their research into a publication can be both exciting and daunting. Join the History Council of NSW with guest speakers including prize-winning historians, a publisher, and an awards judge, as they detail the process of submitting a book proposal, negotiating with publishers, promoting your work and achieving recognition.

Our Speakers

Dr Tanya Evans, historian and author. *Fractured Families: Life on the Margins in Colonial New South Wales* (New South, 2015), written in collaboration with family historians, was awarded the NSW Community and Regional History Prize at the 2016 NSW Premier's History Awards. She wrote *Unfortunate Objects: Lone Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London* (Palgrave, 2005) and with Pat Thane, *Sinners, Scroungers, Saints: Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England* (2012). She is also author of the community funded, supported and written book *Swimming with the Spit: 100 Years of the Spit Amateur Swimming Club* (NewSouth, 2016). She is a senior lecturer in the Department of Modern History at Macquarie University where she teaches Australian history and public history. She has worked as a consultant for the National Council for



historycouncilnsw

the Unmarried Mother and her Child/Gingerbread in the UK, The Benevolent Society and for the Australian television series of *Who do you think you are?* and is the President of the History Council of NSW.

Professor Frank Bongiorno teaches and researches Australian history at the Australian National University in Canberra, and has previously worked at King's College London and the University of New England, Armidale. He is the author of *The Sex Lives of Australians: A History* (Black Inc, 2012), shortlisted for the Australian Prime Minister's Literary Awards and the NSW Premier's History Awards, and *The Eighties: The Decade That Transformed Australia* (Black Inc, 2015). He has also been a regular reviewer of books for a wide range of publications in Australia and the United Kingdom. From 2013 to 2015, he was co-editor of *History Australia*, the Australian Historical Association's journal.

David Carment is Emeritus Professor of History at Charles Darwin University, where he was also Dean of the Faculty of Law, Business and Arts. He is the author and editor of commercially published books on Northern Territory history and politics. Actively involved in community and professional activities, he is a former President of the Australian Historical Association, the Royal Australian Historical Society and the History Council of NSW. During 2015 and 2016 he was a judge for the NSW Premier's History Awards, and has been made senior judge for the 2017 awards. He was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2003.

Phillipa McGuinness has been grappling with copyright issues as a publisher for 20 years, at both Cambridge University Press and [UNSW Press/NewSouth Publishing](#). She has published a number of prize-winning books of Australian history, politics, biography and memoir, including the acclaimed city series of books. She is editor of the book *Copyright* (2015), and is currently working on a history of the year 2001 for Random House Australia.

Presentations

Professor Frank Bongiorno

- Frank's PhD supervisor Barry Smith said "There are no small subjects, only small historians" – that is, don't be dismissive about a subject because it appears small.
- On publishing prize-winning books: Matching a subject to a moment is incredibly important – "the book with the wind in its sails" – but also writing a book that matches a publisher. The format of the book is equally important.
- Most challenging part can be finding a voice that is appropriate for your subject and audience.



historycouncilnsw

- Academics are sometimes pushed by universities to publish things regardless of audience or readership, but the issue of communicating your work and reaching different audiences is much more in the forefront of the academic world than it used to be.
- TV programs, radio documentary, feature article – there are a range of audiences for historical knowledge now, focus is not just on books.
- Advice about finding voice and the right avenue - find a good editor. Not necessarily an individual editor, but editors along the way who can teach you to reach different audiences. Frank was helped by writing Inside Story at Swinburne University – each month 1500-2000 words on variety of topics. Taught him how to write in a more accessible way for broader audience.
- ‘Sex Lives’ book very gradually written over a number of years – no publisher and no audience in mind when set out to write it. Important questions - Who am I writing this for? What particular kind of audience do I have in mind?
- Book reviewing – if you want to write good books you need to read good books. ‘The 80s’ book inspired by a lot of good books that aren’t in the footnotes.
- Promote!!! Frank emphasised the importance of doing the right thing by your publisher – ensuring that the book is noticed.

Dr Tanya Evans

- Labelled herself a social historian – no subject too small, the more ordinary the better
- Family history surely more boring? Never! But you do need to think about audience and how you craft your story. Each book tells its own story.
- Meeting the needs of her employer is important but she increasingly interested in the general audience and how to communicate with them.
- Academics hardly ever had book launches, hardly ever promoted their work – and now they are happening all the time – promotion is key in such a competitive age.
- As she started working with new audiences she found new ways to reach them, some became contributors to her works
- ‘Fractured Families’ incorporated the work of family historians – she wants people to value family history and historians.
- Swimming with the Spit – centenary community history celebration. The book allowed Tanya to write blog posts on the website or draft chapters in a way, and get responses to the work from the local audience. It was a great way to test the waters with the content.
- If you incorporate lots of different people who aren’t used to producing history, you can get them invested in a different way and get different feedback.
- Exhibition now coming out of the book – students involved in the curation of it. Pleases the publisher, the students, the community and herself.
- Think about the different ways the books do different things for audiences.



historycouncilnsw

Phillipa McGuinness

- Phillipa stressed the most important focus is audience – everything you do is about audience
- She shared a list of “Things I wish people would do when putting a book proposal together”:
 1. Think about whether you really want to write a book. Are you doing it because your supervisor or examiners told you to? Because you uncovered some interesting things in the archives, and the world will like it too? Maybe journal article is better – chapter in someone else’s book. A podcast or a film. When reading sample material: this doesn’t read like an extract, this is the whole book, nowhere to go after this. So maybe even an article for The Monthly. Discussions over how much time you’d want to sit reading about this topic.
 2. If you do want to write a book you have to be bold, passionate about your topic, and totally committed – it’s really hard work. It’s fun, but is a lot of work that is all consuming.
 3. Always keep your audience in mind – look outwards to them and not back over your shoulder to your colleagues. Early career researchers are often being undermined by the people around them so be brave. Address what your audience wants but also your own concerns.
 4. What kind of publisher you want? Do research about publishing houses and what they like to create. NewSouth for example is general non-fiction, not much scholarly. It is quite clear what they are interested in and what they review. Get proposals for novels, poetry, specialist books, etc. Talk to other people in your writer network.
 5. When you have found the right one, or you think so, don’t address your email as “Dear Sirs”!
 6. Write your proposal in the style of the book itself
 7. Practice talking about your work to people who aren’t in your field. If you want to write for a general audience, you want to sell and promote, but if you can’t summarise what you’re doing or what your book is about (25 words) you need to practice.
 8. When writing proposal don’t bury “the lead” – phrase from journalism. Put your main point up front. Be bold and upfront about what you’re doing and what you think your book does that no other book does. Tell us about your work too – slot on radio, won a prize etc.
 9. If there is a major event, anniversary or exhibition looming – something topical and timely – don’t approach publishers three months out. Publishers have long lead times so PLAN AHEAD
 10. Prepare for rejection but don’t take it personally. Never!
 - Final comment: always have audience in mind, read widely (won’t be a good writer if you’re not a good reader).

Emeritus Professor David Carment AM

- Speaking about judging – first started in 1980s and has been a senior judge for the NSW Premier’s History Awards



historycouncilnsw

- Writers of books can achieve recognition through prizes
- In Australia we now have a lot of prizes that go to history books – very different situation to 10 or 20 years ago – lots of literary awards that include history and non-fiction.
- Biography awards and lots of specific history awards through associations or state government funding bodies. They are widely advertised and receive lots of entries.
- Quite often winners are established authors or historians, but there have been many occasions where new writers have won awards
- Arguments about whether, given the large number of awards, they are actually achieving their purpose anymore? Some publishers are reluctant to enter books for awards because of the costs involved in submission. Most still enter but some are cutting back.
- David notes there are a lot of benefits to making submissions – boosts morale, recognition, money, and sometimes sales. Most important: recognition of good authors and good books.
- NSW Premier's History Awards – first presented in 1997 – administered by State Library of NSW. Total prize is \$75,000. Four panels, minimum 3 judges on each panel – historians but not necessarily academics – school teachers, curators, other public history backgrounds. Wide spectrum of historical knowledge.
- Essential criteria:
 - Quality of the research – books need to be well-researched, and judges will pick up gaps in the research.
 - Scholarship and analysis is clearly important – the book does should be well argued – can't just be a narrative, does need to be saying something and reaching conclusions based on evidence.
 - Books need to be well-written and written for more than just an academic audience – wider, general audience for people who are interested in history but not necessarily practicing history.
 - Needs to be well-presented – clearly formatted, well produced with references.
 - Book needs to be a new contribution to the understanding of history – doesn't have to be a topic that isn't written about already, but needs to be saying something new and different. If it is a new subject, need to demonstrate through the book that the subject is worthy of being studied and talked about.

Panel session – chaired by Tanya Evans

T: Did you, Phillipa, follow your own advice when writing her proposal for your book?

P: Of course, I've learned what to do and what not to do!

T: Frank what's your experience of proposals been like?

F: not vast, but if a proposal doesn't stand out it's going to go to the bottom of the pile – find your hook, your "lead". Make the proposal snappy and interesting. It showcases your writing skills –



historycouncilnsw

stand out from the crowd! You have friends and advisors who can read it and help. Something fundamentally collective and social about writing a book – can be lonely and hard – but very social too, you need to draw on the expertise of others. Develop and build up your immediate audience – a group of people around you who can read your work and advise you, family and friends but also those who had had experience in this.

T: David? Top tips for writing proposals?

D: Lots of rejection, more often than accepted! Proposals are not quite as important for smaller and niche publishers. A lot of people are self-publishing, sometimes only online – the problem with self-publishing is distribution and marketing. Might not be able to make money but they are still interesting and useful contributions to historical knowledge.

T: On Phillipa – being able to cope with rejection. I say this again and again – gets students to pitch ideas, and think about this – it's a craft – but we do need to cope with rejection, and need to not take it personally.

P: We know we live in a competitive world. What I've found is that getting published is in some ways harder than it used to be. We receive a deluge in January perhaps because of New Year's resolutions! I estimate 3% of what gets submitted (personal, unsolicited, emails, calls etc) actually gets published. That number is probably lower. In NewSouth's recent catalogue of books, none of them were unsolicited. I write constructive rejection letters – because there are many that are so good, but are only going to sell a few copies. Sometimes we won't reject but postpone – send me some sample texts, or do a few things and then come back to me and I might be interested.

T: Let's talk about the financial impact of prizes

F: I sympathise with the publishers, because there are a lot of costs, and the benefits usually go to the author.

P: Prizes have a big impact on the selling of novels – Miles Franklin e.g. Prize that has come out of nowhere The Stellar Prize and has a huge impact on what people buy. The big thing is publicity – they have put a lot of work into promoting the longlist and shortlist – they work really hard at publicising. With fiction there is so much to read, people will often want a bit of direction. Fiction prizes work as a great guide for your own reading. History is a bit different, because you may not have thought you wanted to read those topics, the prize might encourage you to branch out, but usually people stick to their own interests.

D: For the Young Peoples history prize last year (NSW Premier's History Awards), one winner was an author and the other was a Rwandan refugee – English was not his first language, he wrote from his experiences with no experiences with writing and publishing. That was great to see.



historycouncilnsw

Audience Q&A

Q: What are the pros and cons with working with a literary agent?

P: Hard to find a literary agent sometimes, have a lot of the same pressures, but if you're a historian or writing non-fiction there is a bit of an advantage in pitching yourself to an agent. If you have a good saleable book, an agent will love you and help you sell it. Advantage is that they deal with contractual matters. Some agents give great feedback and manage the careers of authors over a long period, very loyal to their authors and can push their career for years. Real advantage is in negotiating contracts.

However, the drawback is cost.

Q: How are literary agents paid?

P: Between 10 and 15% on the author's advance and then a portion from sales.

Q: What is the relationship between history and historical fiction? I'm currently writing historical fiction, interesting listening to different world, but do you see them as the lame cousin of non-fictional history books? What can we take from history writers if we are writing historical fiction?

F: I think we can take a lot from historical fiction. A lot of historians get inspired by historical fiction, that comes under the category of reading great history books. Reading widely! Frank Hardy's 'Power Without Glory' had themes that I took up in my PhD. There are fraught debates about the relationship between history and fiction but I think we have moved a bit beyond that.

T: Some of my favourite books are historical fiction. Pat Barker, Sarah Waters – use them in her teaching all the time. Can't imagine writing fiction myself. What historians have done in the last 20 years has been to think really carefully about the craft of writing itself and how to reach new audiences, making history a bit more novelistic anyway.

F: Novelistic techniques are really indispensable when trying to write history. The way writers evoke a sense of time and place.

Q: Can we talk about copyright? Who retains copyright of work that you are writing when involved with local history society or community?

P: If you are the named author you have copyright unless you have signed a contract with someone that you have given copyright over to.



historycouncilnsw

Q: I'd like to hear more about "the soft rejection". If it's really a no will they say it?

P: Yes! If they say no, it's a no! When soft rejections are given, it might be the publisher thinking out loud, but they don't usually say things they don't mean. Take them at face value.

Q: I am not a historian but I'm interested in writing about Newcastle in 1970s, how do you go about finding an idea to write about, do you read around an idea, or heavy duty research.

F: People work in different ways. There was a strange term going around a few years ago – "curiosity driven research". Read around what other people have written about the area you like, but also get into the primary source research quickly and deeply – as that will help shape the research better. Plunge in!

D: Start writing early. Once you have a bit of material, start writing it up and see how it goes even though you haven't got heaps.

T: Also engage with the local historical society and library – see who is around and think about audience. You might be able to do blog posts as a bit of a journal etc.

Q: I am a Masters student hoping to move to PhD. I like the idea of writing a book, disseminating ideas that aren't widely circulated. When you get to the stage of finishing a PhD and thinking there might be a book in it, what practical advice can you give about changing the thesis into something more of a book? When do you know you've got one?

P: Your topic sounds interesting. The challenge is how you present that material – how you use testimonies, blocks of text from the women themselves, or weave it through with your own voice, or an exhibition that the museum ran, your book could be a companion to it. NewSouth has collaborated with SJM quite a bit. Great topic, but how to tell the story is the challenge.

F: Talk to people when you get closer to that stage and seek advice.

Useful links

- Links to controversy around Prime Minister's awards:
<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/kevin-rudd-overturned-decision-on-prime-ministers-literary-award-say-judges-20160609-gpf3x6.html>
<https://theconversation.com/why-the-prime-ministers-literary-awards-need-an-urgent-overhaul-61300>
- Link to NSW Premier's Literary awards:
<http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/about-library-awards/nsw-premiers-literary-awards>
- Link to NSW Premier's History awards:
<http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/nsw-premiers-history-awards>



historycouncilnsw

- History Council of NSW awards and prizes:
<http://historycouncilnsw.org.au/about/awards-and-prizes/>
- History council of NSW website, including info on programs and membership:
<http://historycouncilnsw.org.au/>
- Australian Historical Association's awards and prizes:
<https://www.theaha.org.au/awards-and-prizes/>