

## Swinburne University of Technology

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### **Digital publishing and the Australian novella: considering the Impact of Nick Earls' *The Wisdom Tree* Sequence**

#### Abstract:

Though often contested and difficult to define, the novella has become more visible in Australian literature in recent years. This increased interest in the novella has often been connected to developments in digital technology and reading culture. Some commentators suggest that the increased distractibility and time poverty of contemporary audiences may make shorter literary works more appealing (Dale 2012), while others claim that the reduced costs of digital publishing may make novellas more commercially viable (Tan 2016). This paper will examine and assess these claims in the context of past and current debate around the status of the novella, using Nick Earls' *Wisdom Tree* (2016) sequence of novellas as a case study so as to consider whether the current rise of digital publishing platforms has shifted the ways in which the form is approached and understood. This discussion has direct implications for fiction writers considering the advantages and affordances of the novella. Writers will need to assess both the possibilities presented by the resurgence of interest in the novella, its long-term sustainability, and future possible directions for the form in a digitally saturated culture.

#### Biographical note:

Award-winning short story writer and novelist, Julian Novitz was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, and currently lives in Melbourne. His first book, a collection of short stories called *My Real Life and Other Stories* (Random House), won the New Zealand Society of Authors Hubert Church Best First Book of Fiction Award (2005) and he has since published several novels. Novitz has completed a PhD in creative writing and literary studies at the University of Melbourne, and has taught courses in creative writing, literature and communications at the University of Melbourne, Deakin University, and the Swinburne University of Technology. He won the Bank of New Zealand Katherine Mansfield Award for Short Fiction in 2008, and was a recipient of the Buddle Findlay Frank Sargeson Residential Writing Fellowship in 2009.

#### Keywords:

creative writing – novellas – digital publishing – Nick Earls – Australian literature



## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a dedicated push on the part of some Australian publishers and journals to promote and publish novella-length works. These initiatives are often linked to discussions of how the rise of digital technology may be changing contemporary reading habits and preferences (for example, Dale 2012) or the economics of publishing itself (Tan 2016). The publication of *The Wisdom Tree* sequence of novellas by Nick Earls in 2016 resulted in a more extensive discussion of the role and status of the novella in Australian literature, which touched upon some of the persistent questions that surround the form: in particular, how it should be defined, the kind of reading experience that it offers, and its commercial viability. Most of these discussions have limited themselves to exploring the Anglo understanding of the novella that emerged in the twentieth century – that it is a work of fiction that falls between the short story and the novel in terms of its length, usually between 15,000 and 50,000 words (Springer 1975: 15) – and the narratives and themes that works of this length may be best suited to. However, an examination of the origin of the term and its application in other literary contexts reveals some defining qualities that go beyond the somewhat arbitrary categorisation of length. These may help to expand our understanding of the contemporary novella, its status in Australia, and how innovations in digital publishing might affect the ways in which the form is delivered and appreciated. This paper will explore and discuss these questions using the publication and reception of Nick Earls' *Wisdom Tree* novellas as its principal case study.

## Origins of the novella

The term novella predates the novel and prior to the twentieth century was applied to both short and medium length literary works. It was first applied to fiction as a means of describing the short narratives collected by Boccaccio in *The Decameron* (c. 1353). The narratives in *The Decameron* combined novelty, in that they were specifically intended to be diverting or previously unknown to their audiences, with a sense of credibility derived from the conversational frame within which they were delivered, ostensibly exchanged by a group of Florentines who had isolated themselves to escape a plague. Hence the Italian word *novella* ('news') was used to describe the narratives, distinguishing these short works of prose fiction from the ballad and epic works of romance (Finney 2005: 122). As similar collections and cycles became popular throughout the Renaissance and Early Modern periods, the term was adapted to describe their narratives in French as *nouvelle*, in Spanish as *novela*, in German as *novelle* and as 'novel' in English (Gillespie 1967: 123). These works generally followed the Boccaccian tradition, written in prose instead of verse and focusing on material (usually a single event or incident) that might have been only an episode in older forms of storytelling (Good 1977: 198). They also tended to focus on characters, actions or incidents that were 'representative of the real life of past or present times' (Gillespie 1967: 118), arguably creating a link between prose storytelling and fictional realism. For example, the tendency to focus on domestic lives and conflicts in *the Decameron* is replicated in the first French novella collection the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles* (1462) (Baker 1984: 230). There was, however, some variation in how the term novella and its variants was applied. In Spanish, the *novela* was used to describe both the short narratives themselves and the collections that contained them (for example, *novela* could be used to describe *Don Quixote* (1601) as a whole and also a single episode from within it) and in English the terms 'novel' and 'romance' could be applied to works of the same length depending on their content. In Italian, French and German literary traditions, the term 'romance' continued to be applied to extended narratives for a longer period, surviving the transition from verse to prose, and so the *novella*, *nouvelle* and *novelle* were exclusively reserved for short-form works (Gillespie 1967: 225-30).

In *The Theory of Prose* (1925), Victor Schklovsky notes an evolution in the novella collections of the Renaissance and Early Modern Periods as the frame or linking narrative that joins the novellas in the collections became increasingly interconnected with the novellas themselves. In early novella collections, like *The Decameron*, the framing narratives are largely separate from the novellas, consisting of characters agreeing to tell the individual stories, or a hero who recurs between the novellas without making reference to earlier plots. Schklovsky argues that the boundaries between the frame narrative and the novellas become increasingly porous as the form develops towards the novel. *Don Quixote*, for example, still consists largely of episodic, novella-like incidents but they are more intricately connected than in earlier novella collections, with sub-plots or side-narratives being intruded upon, related to or interrupted by the main characters, and sub-plot characters being integrated into the main action (Schklovsky 1925: 97-100). Graham Good notes that novels of the eighteenth century retain many of the qualities of the novella collections that they had evolved out of. Self-contained tales and digressions, and episodic structures are often found in the works of early novelists like Richardson, Goethe and Fielding, and it is only really by the start of the nineteenth century that the novel emerged as we know it now – as an extended narrative work with a cohesive plot and thematic structure. The full emergence of the novel allowed a space to define the novella as its own distinct form (Good 1977: 203).

### **Approaching the contemporary novella**

The first concrete attempts to understand the novella as an entirely separate form from that of the novel were made by literary theorists in nineteenth century Germany. The strict distinction between the *novelle* and the *Roman* led to the development of a body of novella theory (*Novellentheorie*) that is not seen in the Anglo tradition (Good 1977: 198). Novellas encompassed any work of prose fiction that was not a romance or novel, and so the discussion focused not on length but on the particular type of story that the novella could or should tell (Breithaupt 2010: 601-602). Friedrich Schlegel (1801) established the common qualities of the German novella, which focused on the novelty of the tale and the conversational style of its telling and disconnected it from the social, cultural and/or historical specificity expected from a novel (Good 1977: 204). In discussing the novella, Goethe further defines its subject matter as 'an unheard of event that has actually taken place' (quoted in Good 1977: 204). This definitively separates the novella from the romance and epic literary traditions, in that it should tell a new story that is realistic or true-to-life in nature, but which is nonetheless unknown to its audience. Though the German literary tradition of the novella explores very different subjects and themes, it arguably demonstrates that elements of the Boccaccian novella persisted into the nineteenth century, particularly the balance between novelty and credibility, and the conversational style and framing (Finney 2005: 122-3). Good (1977: 210) argues that the conversational style or its 'oral quality' marks the novella as a narrative intended to be told in a single, extended sitting.

While the form of the novella was prominently adopted by a number of English language writers (such as Edgar Allen Poe, Henry James and others), the term itself was not used consistently in English language criticism until the twentieth century. As brevity and concision became increasingly emphasised as the distinguishing quality of short form fiction, critics began to discuss the gap in the terminology between the now defined magazine-length 'short story' and the 'novel' that could be filled by the formal adoption of the novella as a distinct category (Good 1977: 199). Whereas the term novella in German criticism referred to a particular type of prose fiction that was neither a romance nor a novel, the English use of the term focused on its particular length rather than the nature of story. In *Forms of the Modern Novella*, Mary Doyle Springer defines the novella as a work between 15,000 to 50,000 words (1973: 15), and attempts to detail the formal affect that works of this length

could produce. She suggests that they are uniquely suited to didactic works (both serious and satirical), which would seem tedious at novel-length or underdeveloped at the length of a short story, and degenerative tragedies which describe characters succumbing to a pre-determined fate as a result of personal flaws or societal conditions (45-55). Springer's focus on the fatalistic qualities of the novella aligns with Howard Nemerov's argument that the novella is an essentially tragic form, as its focus on a few key scenes, characters and details mean that their protagonists lack a wide array of choices or opportunities to change or shift their nature (Nemerov 1963:193-194). In *Narrative Purpose and the Novella*, Judith Leibowitz suggests that novellas are best understood as works of a certain length that are able to deliver a particular aesthetic affect as a result of that length:

Whereas the short story limits material and the novel extends it, the novella does both in such a way that a special kind of narrative structure results, one which produces a generically distinctive effect: the double effect of intensity and expansion. (Leibowitz 1974: 16)

Leibowitz goes on to suggest that this effect is usually achieved through a focus on a single key or pivotal 'event', which is repeatedly returned to and re-examined over the course of the novella. Thus, the singular focus of the novella is gradually expanded, descriptively and thematically, through this re-examination, in a way that distinguishes the novella from the short story, which typically only details its key event once, or a novel, where the narrative is built through a series of connected events in the lives of its characters (1974: 16-18). Leibowitz's focus on the singular 'event' and the discovery of its meaning through examination fits with the emphasis placed by Schlegel and Goethe on the 'unheard-of' event as a defining feature of the novellas of their period. Briethaupt observes that this tendency to return to and re-examine a single significant event means that novellas often lack traditional narrative suspense, in that the reader is usually encouraged to question and understand 'what *has* happened?' rather than 'what *will* happen?' (2010: 601). By contrast, the novelist John Gardner understands a novella not as focusing on a single major event, but rather as usually limited to one single stream of action, an 'emotional line' that directs a single character through an increasingly intense series of climaxes (1986: 179-184).

Popular and critical approaches have tended to align with Doyle and Leibowitz in dividing prose fiction into three categories, with the novella occupying the middle-ground between novel and short story. However, this understanding is occasionally contested. Graham Good makes a persuasive case for grouping the novella and the short story due to their historical and formal similarities, and argues that the twentieth century term 'short story' had been anachronistically applied to nineteenth century and non-Anglo writing. According to Good, applying the term novella to all works of prose fiction that are not novels is not only historically accurate, but avoids a definition of the novella that rests entirely on the question of length (Good 1977:206). In a similar sense, the American novelist Richard Ford sought to avoid a definition that rested entirely on length by rejecting the term entirely when considering how it might be applied to twentieth century American fiction. In his essay, 'Why Not a Novella' (1999), he argues that the contemporary works considered as novellas have few formal qualities in common with Renaissance or nineteenth century novellas, and therefore finds the term 'story' to be sufficient, simply distinguishing between 'long' and 'short' stories for works of prose fiction that are not novels. More recent discussions of the novella have tended to focus on its brevity rather than suggesting it is uniquely suited to particular subject matters or structures. Writers like John Dale and Ian McEwan essentially describe it as a more focused refinement of the contemporary novel. McEwan suggests that the novella may appeal to the reader who reads a full-length novel and 'thinks quietly, mutinously, that it would have worked out better at half or a third the length' (McEwan 2012). Dale contends that the appeal of the novella resides in the efficient and focused

storytelling that it demands, stating that, 'The return of the novella coincides with the return of narrative. The novella strips narrative back to its essentials, cuts away the flab and excess baggage' (2012: 12). In short, while the term novella is generally accepted for prose fiction works that fall between the standard magazine-length short story and the novel, there remains some unresolved debate around the validity and specific qualities of its contemporary form.

### **The novella in Australia**

In Australia the novella has been a fairly minor component of local literary production. A number of commentators have ascribed this to the costs of publishing local literature for a relatively small readership (Dale 2012; Earls 2016b). An individually published print novella costs as much to produce as a full-length text, but given that books in Australia are expensive relative to other locations, the accepted wisdom is the consumers will balk at paying a roughly the same price for a shorter work (Schultz 2012: 3). This forces publishers to either price novellas more competitively, which means accepting a lower return on the same cost of production as a novel, or to only individually publish novella-length works when they are confident that they will still attract enough buyers when retailing at a similar price as a novel. Despite this, writer A.S. Patric has observed that novellas have had a presence in the Australian literary landscape (2016: 5). Either they are published and promoted as short novels, like David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* (1978), included in story collections, like Helen Garner's *Cosmo Cosmolino* (1992), or collected with other novellas, as in Patrick White's novella collection *the Cockatoos* (1974) or Krissy Kneen's *Triptych* (2011). This often means that novellas are not recognised and considered in their own right, and their identity and impact can be lost or obscured within larger collections. When Australian novellas are published individually and have a significant impact – for example, Helen Garner's *The Children's Bach* (1984), Simon Leys' *The Death of Napoleon* (1986), or Peter Goldsworthy's *Maestro* (1989) – they tend to come from authors who have already established a strong readership through novels or novel-length works, and can reasonably be expected to sell enough copies of their novellas to make the venture profitable. As there are only a relatively small number of Australian authors with this level of popularity at any given time, and their novella-length works tend to be occasional rather than regular publications, it would be fair to say that the novella as a literary form has had a limited presence and impact in Australia, at least until recently.

Since 2012, a number of initiatives have been established aimed to publish novellas and novella-length works in Australia. The Giramondo shorts series was established in that year to publish long essays and novella-length fiction, as were two significant novella writing competitions: *Griffith Review's* the Novella Project, and *Seizure's* Viva La Novella. In 2012, Penguin Australia also launched their Penguin specials range of short books (80-100 pages), which while mainly limited to non-fiction, has included some novellas. In more recent developments, Inkerman and Blunt published a series of linked novellas, collectively titled as *The Wisdom Tree* by Nick Earls in 2016. While all of these initiatives are dedicated to short-form publishing and include novellas, there is some variation in their agendas and outcomes. Both the Novella Project and Viva La Novella specifically focus on the form of the novella, aiming to promote it to a wider readership. For example, the website for Viva La Novella states that the prize was established 'because we love the form and believe that some of the greatest works in the English language are actually novellas' (viewed 2017). By contrast, the Giramondo Shorts series generally avoids using the term 'novella', even for works that would arguably fit within the category, like Brian Castro's *Street to Street* (2012). The Penguin Specials range has generally focused on short non-fiction, with only a few novellas being published. Penguin Specials have included non-fiction work from first time authors – for example Ronnie Scott's *Salad Days* (2014) and Sofija Stefanovic's *You're Just too Good to*

*be True* (2015) – but the infrequent novellas have come from well-established Australian authors, such as Anna Funder's *The Girl with Dogs* (2015), and international writers. This perhaps indicates that this publisher considers short-form fiction a riskier proposition than non-fiction. A 2016 interview with Nick Earls suggests that *The Wisdom Tree* sequence of novellas was published with the intention of testing this assumption, speculating that digital culture and the increasing popularity of ebooks may contribute to a renewed interest in the novella as a form (Eaton 2016). Indeed, the rise of networked, digital technology and its impact on both reading habits and literary publishing is often a component of the discussion around these recent short-form publishing initiatives and the contemporary Australian interest in the novella more specifically.

### **The Australian novella and digital publishing**

As noted earlier, a number of these short form publishing initiatives (*Griffith Review's* the Novella Project, *Seizure's* Viva La Novella Prize, Giramondo Shorts and Penguin Specials) emerged in 2012, when concern about the impact of digital technology on Australian literary culture was becoming more pronounced due to some significant upsets in the year before. The year 2011 saw the collapse and closure of the REDgroup, parent company of Angus and Robertson and Borders, chains responsible for 20% of Australia's book sales (Lim 2011). Australian physical book sales, which had already been in decline in 2010, fell sharply in 2011 (declining by 13% in volume and 18% in value) with a decline in total revenue continuing into 2012 by as much as 20% (Coronel 2012: 18). At the same time as physical book sales were declining in Australia, ebook sales were seeing a strong upswing in the two international literary markets that tend to have the most impact on Australia: the United Kingdom and the United States. The years 2011 and 2012 saw ebooks sales grow by 54% and 69% respectively in the United Kingdom (Wischenbart 2014: 20) and by 139% and 30% in the United States (Earls 2016a). In Australia, the failure of REDgroup was frequently attributed to their focus on bricks-and-mortar stores over online and digital sales (Lim 2011), and there was a broad perception that Australian booksellers and publishers were slow to take advantage of the growing appetite for ebooks (Coronel 2012, 21). Amazon launched its Web Services platform for Australia in 2012, and by 2013 Australian readers were able to buy ebooks directly from its kindle store using Australian currency (Earls 2016a). The years 2012-2013 saw a spike in Australian ebook sales (growing to make up 29% of Australian book sales) as many local publishers started to release digital editions of books from their backlist (Jefferies 2016: 5). The timing suggests that it is possible that this embrace of short form initiatives by four very different publishers was at least in part a response to – or an attempt to capitalise on – these turbulent movements in Australian literary publishing, with the assumption being that shorter publications would become more viable thanks to the rise of e-publishing and perhaps also be more likely to hold the attention of an increasingly time poor reading public who appeared to be turning away from novel-length, physical books. In the introduction to the *Griffith Review's* first edition of the Novella Project, Juliane Schultz writes,

While the ubiquitous screens have created new platforms, and demanded new styles, they have also profoundly disrupted the economics of publishing as they have functioned for centuries. Books can now be downloaded, transmitted around the world and copied at the click of a mouse ... In this context we believe the time is right for the revival of the novella... Publishers have traditionally shied away from the form – the price required to justify getting a book into print could leave customers feeling shortchanged if they were asked to spend the same on a 400-page book as one with just 90 (feel the quality not the width). The digital age has disrupted publishing in what many consider to be a calamitous way. But by providing an opportunity to revive the novella – for delivery to the device of your choosing – it may also revive one of the richest and most rewarding literary forms. (3)

When interviewed about *The Wisdom Tree* sequence, Nick Earls has repeatedly suggested that publication would solve the problems of cost and pricing for novellas (Eaton 2016; Tan 2016). Elsewhere, Earls offers the examples of the high sales achieved by Stephen King's novella *Riding the Bullet* (2000), the first commercial ebook ever published, and by the 2011 Kindle Shorts series (a range of novella-length fiction and non-fiction titles by high-profile authors published as ebooks) as support for the increased viability of the novella in a digital age (Earls 2016b). The success of a digital novella from an author like King, with a substantial international following, is unlikely to be replicated by authors with smaller readerships, but publication may still make short form publications more sustainable. The website for Giramondo Shorts states that 'digital printing' makes it possible to produce short form publications that will 'appeal to a community of literary readers' (viewed 2017), suggesting that the reduced costs of digital publication make it possible for publishers to profitably target the smaller and more specific audiences that might be receptive to literary novellas.

Alongside the suggestion that ebooks and digital technology will allow for the cheaper production and/or more competitive and flexible pricing for novella-length publications, a number of commentators have also suggested that changes to reading habits brought about by the rise of digital culture may make Australian readers receptive to the form of the novella (Eaton 2016; Dale 2012). In the digitally saturated present, readers are increasingly distractible, having become more accustomed to engagements with a wide range of shorter texts, as opposed to a prolonged engagement with a single text (Carr 2010: 87-89). This has led to speculation that literary publishing may be transformed by a 'single sitting revolution', where shorter narratives that can be accessed by handheld devices become more popular than longer forms (Versteegh 2012). Earls has emphasised that novellas fit with this trend in contemporary reading, providing depth and focus without the time commitment demanded by a full-length novel (Earls 2016b). The marketing pitches for a number of the short form publishing initiatives discussed above overtly acknowledge the time-poverty that many readers encounter in the digital age. The Novella Project states that its publications are 'perfectly designed for busy people to read in one sitting' (*Griffith Review* website, viewed 2017) and Penguin Specials are described being suited to a 'lunch hour', 'long commute' or 'short journey' (Penguin Specials website, viewed 2017). In short, the current interest in the form of the novella in Australia appears connected to the changes in both the economics of publishing and contemporary reading habits brought about by developments in digital technology. An examination of this frequently drawn link between shifts in technology and the novella will therefore be relevant to creative writers considering its potential and possibilities, both in terms of the pathways to publication that may now be available for novella-length works as well as the extent to which contemporary, digitally saturated readers may now be more receptive to the form.

### **Nick Earls' *The Wisdom Tree***

*The Wisdom Tree* sequence by Nick Earls (Inkerman and Blunt, 2016) provides a useful opportunity for assessing the synergy between digital innovations and the novella. Interviews with Earls indicate that *The Wisdom Tree* was intended to test the commercial viability of individually published novellas in print and digital formats (Tan 2016; Eaton 2016). The sequence has been positively received by many critics (for example, Pierce 2016; Lynch 2016), and, according to Earls, has generated a larger than usual amount of interest, demonstrated by a relatively high number interviews and festival and speaking invitations related to its publication, even for a writer with his already well established and significant



readership (Earls 2017). The sequence itself and some of the discussion around it therefore serves as an interesting case study for the status of the novella in the contemporary Australian literary landscape.

*The Wisdom Tree* consists of five linked novellas, published in monthly intervals in 2016 in both trade paperback and ebook editions. In contrast to the typical Australian publishing strategy for novella-length works as described by Patric (2016), they were very deliberately presented and promoted as novellas, and furthermore they possess a number of the formal qualities that have been associated with the novella across its history. They are all works with a single protagonist that follow a single 'emotional line' (Gardner 1977: 183) and generally lack conventional suspense or tension as Breithaupt (2010: 601) describes, being more concerned with the protagonist's discovery, construction or contemplation of meaning in relation to a particular event, which is also in keeping with Leibowitz's (1974) observations. They are all told in the first person with the conversational voice and style that Schlegel (1801) considers an essential element of the novella. Furthermore their narratives, while modest and undramatic on the surface (for example, an Australian music journalist interviewing a Hip Hop artist in New York, a novelist visiting an old family friend in the immediate wake of 9/11), reveal unexpected connections and identities. This demonstrates the combination of novelty and credibility important to German novella theory and recalls the Boccaccian origins of the form (Finney 2005: 123). While, as Piece (2016) argues, they do not possess the tragic structure that Nemanov (1963: 193) understood as one of the novella's defining traits, the protagonists of *The Wisdom Tree* are not given the opportunity to make any particularly significant decisions, actions or changes within their narratives, providing the fatalistic tone that Doyle (1975) identifies in a number of significant novellas.

Presenting a post-mortem on *The Wisdom Tree* experiment at the 2017 Independent Publishing Conference in Melbourne, Earls compared the sales of the individual volumes of *The Wisdom Tree* with one of his earlier publications, *Welcome to Normal* (2012). *Welcome to Normal* was a conventional story collection, which included a number of novellas, published by Penguin Random House at RRP \$29.95 (pbook) or around \$10.99 (ebook). The print novellas of *The Wisdom Tree* each retailed for \$20 (later adjusted to \$15), with the ebooks selling at around \$4.99 for most of their lifespan. The total word count of all five novellas is approximately 100,000 words, only slightly in excess of the standard length of a commercially published novel or story collection. Despite the much higher cost relative to quantity of entertainment represented by *The Wisdom Tree* novellas for readers, print sales of the work as a whole substantially outstripped that of *Welcome to Normal*: 7890 to 2565 (Earls 2017). According to Neilson BookScan, as of 9 July 2018 the individual volumes in the series sold in the following numbers:

*Gotham* (2016): 1370

*Venice* (2016): 964

*Vancouver* (2016): 740

*Juneau* (2016): 601

*NoHo* (2016): 571. (Neilson Company 2018)

Neilson BookScan only tracks the number of print sales through bricks-and-mortar bookstores, and does not include the books sold personally and through other forms of distribution that Earls factors into his 2017 calculation of the total print sales of the series (though it may be assumed that they follow a similar distribution). While individually publishing print editions of each volume added additional costs for the publisher, the total of 7890 is a very healthy sales figure, given that most literary titles published in Australia only

have print runs of around 2000-4000 copies (Zwar et al. 2015). Citing the relative success of *The Wisdom Tree* experiment, Earls has proposed that sequences or series of individually published books might be a more successful strategy for novella publishing than the tradition of publishing multiple novellas together or as components of a short story collection. It remains to be seen if *The Wisdom Tree* experiment can be sustainably replicated without the reinvigorated discussion of the novella that the project prompted and once the novelty of the publishing strategy has worn off, especially given that the Neilson figures indicate a gradually diminishing interest in the later volumes in the sequence. However, the relative success of the series as a whole arguably indicates that Earls and his publishers were correct in their contention that readers would be receptive to a novella sequence, even given the proportionately higher costs relative to the quantity of entertainment.

One area where *The Wisdom Tree* experiment arguably underwhelmed, however, was with regard to ebook sales. The difference from *Welcome to Normal* was more modest than the difference in print sales: 1145 to 625 (Earls 2017). This is surprising given that the Earls emphasised the role of digital publication in reviving the novella. Earls noted that when he began the project he had expected digital sales to be more of a driving force, but suggested that the international focus of the Kindle shopfront and the focus on best-selling authors meant that it is difficult for literary titles and local authors to achieve visibility. While Earls' publisher was satisfied with the ebook sales, it seems that the real profitability of the venture was found the traditional networks of print publishing and physical retail. Despite the less prominent role of digital sales, Earls felt that his points about the need for the novella in a digitally saturated contemporary culture and the opportunities this culture presents for novella writing and publication were still valid. Even if digital sales did not drive the project in the manner he had anticipated, readers were drawn to the opportunity for a sustained, focused but limited experience that a novella presents (Earls 2017). While it is certainly true that the time-poverty and media bombardment encountered in digital culture may have contributed to the overall success of this project (coupled with a sustained publicity campaign), it is surprising that readers were still principally drawn to the print editions over the much more competitively priced ebooks. This trend in *The Wisdom Tree's* sales calls into question the assumption that the shifting economies of e-publishing will necessarily support the revival of the literary novella as a form.

### **Digital directions for the novella**

While the boom in ebooks and the uncertainty around print publishing and retail models appears to have at least partially inspired many of the recent Australian initiatives to revive or revisit the literary novella, the idea that they are naturally suited to ebook formats remains debatable. Visibility is likely to remain an issue as the Kindle Bookstore expands. Despite the opportunities that ebooks present for lower costs and competitive pricing, it seems that it will be difficult for the literary novella, with its emphasis of the construction of meaning (Leibowitz 1974: 16-17) and lack of conventional suspense (Briethuapt 2010: 601), to achieve prominence in an arena that is dominated – to an even greater degree than bricks-and-mortar bookstores – by heavily plot-focused fiction (Arts Council England 2017: 30). While novella-length works of genre fiction are published and promoted on the Kindle Bookstore, often they are used to supplement novel-length works and are not always published with the expectation that they will generate comparable sales. For example, Harlequin has published short story and novella length ebooks in the Spice Bites range since 2009, but principally as a testing ground for new authors and concepts (Skodzinski 2009). The stated intention behind James Patterson's range of novella-length thrillers 'Bookshots' was not so much to drive sales as to provide a convenient re-entry point for lapsed readers of his range (Alter 2016). This contrasts markedly with a project like *The Wisdom Tree*: while

Earls might naturally hope the project would draw readers to his past and future novel-length titles, interviews indicate that the sequence was intended to explore the commercial viability of novellas in their own right (Eaton 2016; Tan 2016). As noted earlier, the volumes of *The Wisdom Tree* engage with some of the formal features that have been associated with the novella throughout its history, whereas the romance and thriller examples noted above generally approach the novella as a streamlined novel, with faster pacing and less extraneous detail. Patterson's 'Bookshots' range, for example, uses the marketing with the tag line 'All Thriller, No Filler.'

It should also be noted that simply embracing shorter forms of fiction will not necessarily encourage digital readers to consume more literary fiction. As Taylor (2017) points out, the focused attention and rapid development of empathy required by short form literature, like novellas and magazine-length short stories, might even more difficult to maintain in a digitally saturated reading culture than the type of attention demanded by the novel, which anticipates moments of high and low engagement and can be more easily skimmed and browsed. This is supported by Mangen and Kuiken's study of readers' engagement with digital texts, which notes that readers struggled to maintain a sense of empathy and narrative coherence when reading a literary short story on a digital platform in comparison to readers of print (2014: 19-23).

As Earls notes, the highly successful publicity campaign and positive critical reception for *The Wisdom Tree* still seemed to result in a more impressive increase in print sales as opposed to digital sales (2017), suggesting either that publishing promotion is still very much grounded in print culture, and/or that when the attention of Australian literary readers is engaged they still gravitate to print editions. The time poverty and demands of the digital world may encourage the desire for the focused but ultimately brief reading experience that the novella provides, but the idea that digital reading formats will present an ideal medium for their transmission is still debatable. This is reflected in the results of a number of novella-focused initiatives in publishing in the United States (from Melville House, *Nouvella* and *Ploughshares* magazine), which, despite producing competitively priced ebook editions of their titles, did not succeed in drawing a significantly higher proportion of their readership to embrace that medium (Bourne 2013: 83-84). In short, while the digitally saturated nature of the contemporary context may contribute to the renewed interest in and desire for novellas, it is possible to overemphasise the extent to which digital publishing itself can contribute to the revival of the form, especially when coupled with the slowing growth in ebook sales that has been reported internationally (Miliot 2016; Nowell 2014). There is a broader conversation currently occurring around the ways in which commercial Australian publishers are responding to the challenges presented by e-publishing and digital culture. This debate has questioned the tendency among publishers to view ebooks as adjuncts or additions to print editions (Coronel 2012; Donoughue 2013), their awareness of the impact that online reviews and aggregations will have on commercial publications (Davies 2016), and the adequacy of their responses to issues surrounding rights, metadata, the publisher/author relationship and the definition of publication itself in a digital age (O'Shaughnessy 2016). Some of the current discussion around the status of the literary novella and digital publishing/technology connects to these concerns. For while the novella may be experiencing a resurgence in Australia and further afield, it remains strongly wedded to the reading values and experiences of print culture.

One particular result, however, from *The Wisdom Tree* experiment suggests that a different direction could be taken when attempting to situate the form of the novella in the digital age and environment. Earls' presentation noted that audiobook sales for *The Wisdom Tree* novellas were unexpectedly substantial, totalling 1896, which is close to double that of the

ebook sales (Earls 2017). Audiobooks were previously a niche area of interest, but as their technology has become more accessible and portable demand for the medium has risen (Moyer 2012: 340-341). Furthermore, sales for audiobooks appear to have grown at a much faster rate than ebook sales over the last few years (Earls 2016a). Both the expanding sales for audiobooks generally and the significant success of *The Wisdom Tree* novellas in this regard suggest that audiobook publication could be profitably explored as a digital strategy for short form literary publications alongside the focus on ebooks. Furthermore, the growing popularity of narrative podcasting suggests another point of synergy that could be explored. Also pertinent here are the possible synergies between podcast listeners and readers of print books (Morris 2015) and the literary potential of podcasting (DeMair 2017: 24-28). This suggests that novellas could easily be adapted into the audio medium and find an engaged audience, especially given that many popular podcasts in the vein of *Serial* focus – like literary novellas – on the construction and discovery of meaning, encouraging speculation on what *has* happened, to echo Breithaupt (2010: 601), rather than what will happen. The focused nature of the novella and its dedication to the full exploration of a 'single emotional line' (Gardner 1983: 183) arguably makes it a more natural fit for a podcast-like adaptation into an audio narrative than the multiple plotlines of a novel or the radical concision of magazine length short fiction. Furthermore, audio narration recalls and emphasises one of the key elements of the traditional form of the novella as identified by Schlegel (1801) – its conversational nature. In his summation of the essential elements that distinguish the novella from the novel, Graham Good twice emphasises the importance of the novella's 'oral quality' as mode of storytelling, noting that 'the novella is the written imitation of a live "telling"' (1977: 210). This claim is debatable, though it arguably fits with Finney's (2005: 122) contention that the tendency to embed novella narratives within a 'frame' (where a character recounts and reflects upon an event they have heard of, witnessed or experienced) is one of the elements that connects novella-writing tradition of the nineteenth century to the origins of the form in Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. While it is certainly possible to present counter-examples, a diverse body of seminal literary novellas retain an explicit or implied conversational or confessional storytelling frame, including Henry James' *Turn of the Screw* (1898), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) or Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958). This suggests that this oral quality may be a useful way of defining or discussing historical and contemporary approaches to the novella in ways that go beyond the somewhat arbitrary question of length. Indeed, all five of the volumes in Nick Earls' *The Wisdom Tree* sequence are narrated in an intimately conversational style, which no doubt contributes to their successful adaptation into an audiobook form.

Good goes on to argue that the novella's length is 'related to the attention span of a live audience in a single sitting. Dramas are acted for spectators, novels are written for readers, but novellas are told to hearers' (1977: 211). For Good, it is this 'oral quality' that gives the novella its sense of intimacy and intensity. Where the novel attempts to create or capture its own world, the novella's goal is often persuasive – to convince the reader that a particular event occurred and that it was meaningful or significant. This makes the often conversational nature of the novella – the sense of a direct relationship between the narrator and their audience – particularly important to their success, and this quality could be powerfully conveyed through contemporary audio mediums.

## Conclusion

The emergence or revitalisation of the novella after a period of absence or obfuscation is not necessarily unusual. There is no real consistency to the role that a novella plays in the development of a national tradition of prose fiction, but Georg Lukacs (1972) argues that the novella tends to appear and gain prominence either as a precursor to the emergence of great

social realist works or 'as a rearguard, the termination at the end of a period' (quoted in Good 1977: 202). It is therefore tempting to question whether the current interest in the form of the novella is serving as a capstone to an era of Australian literature or as beginning of a new movement. While it remains to be seen if the success of *The Wisdom Tree* publishing experiment can be replicated in a sustainable way, I am inclined to argue that the contemporary focus on the novella is operating as the former rather than the latter. While *The Wisdom Tree* and other ventures have demonstrated that the concision and intensity of the literary novella can appeal to time-poor, digitally saturated readers, there is not much indication, as of yet, that the shifting economies of digital publishing are contributing to their popularity. *The Wisdom Tree's* comparatively strong audiobook sales, however, do indicate a way in which some of the formal qualities of the literary novella may be resituated in emergent online storytelling forms, like podcasting.

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