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## TEXT prose

### Phillip Edmonds

#### *Giving it away*

Warwick didn't realize at the time that he was participating in the end of an era. He was being typically feisty, priding himself on his larrikin behaviour by chasing injustices and in his own words, 'having a crack', even if he was sometimes prone to exaggeration. It was after all, so he was led to believe, part of the Australian characteristic of pride in the underdog, that old chestnut trotted out when there are bushfires and other natural calamities, containing mateship and good humour. But things were changing rapidly he would soon discover.

He had for years been involved in publishing a magazine that contained fiction by mainly local writers, but it had a limited circulation because it wasn't about celebrities and royal gossip, popular cultural things, and the latest overseas trends. *Manic* was a beautifully designed print magazine which had a good circulation prior to the digital onslaught around 2012, when newspapers were under siege and the media became more fragmented and individualized. *Manic* was sold in bookshops, some newsagents and by subscription, and was relatively typical of attempts to suggest that Australians weren't all the same.

But prior to 2012 Warwick had a great time 'having a crack' around the country, boasting how he'd seen his magazine in newsagents in country towns, miles from the inner city where it was assumed the usual cultural consumers

lived. How he joyfully left it in coffee shops where many proprietors wanted to establish a ‘community’ environment with raffish colours and suggestions of a more intimate experience than chain stores and fast-food outlets. He’d had of course somewhat of a religious upbringing so proselytising wasn’t all that difficult for him. Because the story got to be so typically anecdotal, he regaled work colleagues with yarns about how proud *Manic* looked on coffee tables in groovy North Fitzroy and Glebe, and also in Ocean Grove and Victor Harbour, and the day he saw it face out in the railway kiosk in Adelaide Central Station. In fact, the distributor had a map on their website marked by red buttons wherever *Manic* went which Warwick refreshed constantly.

He’d had long talks with Derrick the distributor in Sydney about the ‘problem’ of airport bookshops, that they only stocked highly promoted books such as romance novels, a few bestsellers, the latest non-fiction and anything by cricketers and people famous for things other than writing. Derrick though was philosophical as he sold what he called specialist magazines, that had niche markets and that the managers of airport bookshops needed to see a market. He had tried with all the major outlets but with no success.

The mantra was that they ‘were trying’. And Warwick didn’t mind all that much as he imagined that he might be a typical Aussie battler, as we were being told that was a good thing. He didn’t mind climbing that mountain as he felt it was a useful thing to do. Australians he hoped weren’t just lemmings; things had changed after the 1970s and they, he imagined, were now more sophisticated than their masters. But, of course, he shouldn’t have taken it so personally, but he had to – mountains aren’t mountains if only scaled by machines, and it really pissed him off that multinational publishers were really the only firms promoted in those bookshops.

Quite often Warwick had to go interstate from his work in Adelaide and he’d always be early for his flights so he, after studying the flight information, sat sullenly within sight of the bookshops, observing the long queues at the cash registers, people buying lollies for their flights, magazines that one could only really flick at, and the self-satisfied look of the more educated traveller with the latest novel by the winner of the Booker Prize under his or her arm. Why can’t my story and that of people he admired also be featured? he fumed. Airport terminals were by then private spaces, the public had to be organized, as the whole idea of ‘community’ had been overtaken by ‘the market’, people were encouraged into buying lifestyles, and there were no notice boards where messages could be left – they had phones for that by then. Why had we become so timid? Why aren’t we rebellious anymore?

For a year or two he was well behaved, even though he could be heard muttering under his breath about ‘cultural imperialism’. He didn’t make it audible as some of the customers would have said, ‘We like that – as it is our way of finding out what is happening in the rest of the world’. They might have even have said, with a knowing smile, that, ‘It’s not an issue, Australia isn’t parochial anymore, you know.’

But the day came when he decided that something needed to happen. Armed with a bundle of *Manics* in his bag, he decided to be forceful; after all, he’d been polite and professional through the early years of social media by providing free of charge widespread publicity on the net. Opposite where he was sitting was a long magazine rack containing copious quantities of *Cosmopolitan*, *Women’s Weekly*, and assorted business magazines. He was nervous, after checking out whether the nearest CCTV camera could possibly catch him, so he strode across to the stand, and in what seemed like a grand gesture, shifted the magazines sideways, and then arranged his *Manics* in the new space. He tried to be nonchalant and flicked at the remaining magazines, before buying a chocolate bar at the cash register. There it was, he’d donated free stock to the airport bookshop, and walking away to his flight he felt like a cultural guerrilla, and he smiled along the concourse, but was slightly worried that he could be followed by security guards for behaving strangely, yet concluding that the *Manics* might sell, given they had a working barcode.

The flight to Melbourne was typically short and merciful providing plenty of time to get to his academic conference close to the city centre. But, of course, he couldn’t help himself so he left a few magazines on the seats in his row on the plane, and in the terminal book shop before he left the airport, in case some of his fellow travellers might pick them up. Maybe there was a cleaner who wrote stories and might appreciate a free copy, and on the airport bus into the city he felt slightly crazy.

The university where the conference was being held prided itself on housing a Chair in Australian literature, somewhere up in the bowels of the English Department, a place away from the vicious world of airport departure lounges. Warwick had been invited to talk about the topic ‘Is small press publishing the grass roots of local writing?’ by a professor who saw him as a kind of larrikin, someone who spoke his mind. The conference theme was basically how Australian literature had become global, indeed respectable, since the 1980s and because Warwick was feeling feral, he was tempted to tell the delegates about his activities in the departure lounges but didn’t, as that might be a bit funny, and sad, for that kind of audience. The excitement of earlier in the day had worn off.

The professor had the clipped tones of a sensitive literary critic, a well-fed cultivated shyness, but he had no fight in him. Warwick wanted to like him but he couldn't because he knew that the professor was watching only and not participating. Some universities were teaching creative writing but they were increasingly retreating into 'theory' while waiting to see whether any of their investments would pay off.

Warwick found it hard to settle as he was aware that there was a new magazine outlet in the city which he wanted to check out. So he nicked off down Elizabeth Street as it was only a ten minute walk away and he was pleased to see that Derrick (the distributor) had managed to legally get *Manic* into the shop, this time resplendent in the window.

Returning to the conference he tried to settle again into the session. The chair of the session was so earnest, the world outside seemed to stop as everyone concentrated on key concepts and what someone had said about someone else. Warwick was asked to speak but he couldn't find a prose that wasn't a pastiche of some sort, and there was a very undemocratic moment when the editor of a prestigious journal surreptitiously suggested that encouraging unknown, theoretically uninformed writers only led to shades of crass 'realism'. Another panellist joyfully announced that before long all the print magazines would go on-line, and become even more irrelevant because no one would really want to invest and they would be too easy to obtain. But by this time Warwick was drifting off, studying the program to determine when he could run away and continue magazine drops.

His trip was also about a few family events such as his nephew's wedding in Sydney, and then a period of time in Queensland, so he was anxious to get moving. Flying to Sydney he thought he saw opportunities for distribution through low cloud above some of the larger towns down below, the pity was that he didn't have a drone to drop copies and there was no permission to speak of.

He repeated his Adelaide move at Sydney airport. This time it was busier, and no one seemed to notice he was there. After shifting the *Weeklies* and the *Cosmopolitans* from clear sight, and installing the colourful covers of *Manic*, he settled down to watch whether anyone might notice the change. A few student types picked up the magazine, and then two young girls dressed in the uniform of the book chain started consulting their clip boards and checking stock. They found the *Manics* sitting like aliens, occupying a place without an invitation, so they placed them in a large dump bin behind the main counter.

Later, at Coolangatta airport, there was no stress; people seemed as if they were always on holiday, so the *Manics* stayed on display after he left to catch the bus.

Back in Adelaide he regaled friends about the trip, noting hysterically the contradictions of all of it, hoping deep down that they would see again that he hadn't been blunted by common sense. Then the phone rang at work. Derrick said that he'd been contacted by the manager of the shop in Adelaide. That she was upset someone had been illegally putting stock into her shop without permission. 'Was it you? Could you speak to her about it – perhaps apologize please?' he said. His co-editor also got in touch and sternly suggested, 'Don't do it again', because she knew it was hard for him to take no for an answer.

He rang Carol, the Adelaide bookshop manager, hoping that she'd changed her mind and might have taken pity by then over such a pathetic act. But she was stropky and haughty. 'How dare you come into my shop and play around with my stock. It is a business, you know, and *we* will decide what people read.' But inside her bluster there was a hint of anxiety, as if she knew that writers and readers sometimes come from nowhere.

*Phillip Edmonds published several magazines including Wet ink (2004-2012) and wrote Tilting at Windmills: The literary magazine in Australia 1968-2012 (University of Adelaide Press, 2018). He taught creative writing at Griffith and Adelaide Universities after working in publishing in Melbourne.*