

What types of issues-based writing do you publish?

There's no limit really. There's a guide on our website that spells out in a few words what we're interested in publishing, and there are also submission guidelines. We would urge would-be writers to look at that before they contact us. We're interested in any serious non-fiction writing – politics, history, biography, philosophy, cultural criticism, etc. As long as it's well written and well argued we're potentially interested. We don't think in terms of length; I always think a book is as long or as short as it needs to be. But, a minimum would be around 50,000 words, and we generally don't like publishing more than 100,000. We very rarely ask authors to write to a specific length, but we may advise on length once we've read it if we can see there are structural problems.

Are you more likely to publish well-known or expert writers?

We don't have a policy of looking only for well-known people. Obviously we do publish some well-known people and currently Julian Burnside is a very good example. We're more interested in the quality of the argument and the writing. Everyone was unknown at some stage so it would be stupid to only publish known writers. However, someone who is unknown must have good credentials to write in a specialist field. The first question the media will ask is "who is this person?" – if we say "they're a well-meaning individual who's very interested in the subject", then that's end of story; the media will just say "go away". Of course, credentials can vary enormously – you can still have credentials without having published before, but you must have a credible story to tell.

Do you accept unsolicited work?

See our submission guidelines – there's a specific procedure outlined there. We do commission issues-based writing from time to time, eg *Asbestos House* by Gideon Haigh; but commissioning is a very fraught activity – often it's the wrong subject and the right author, or the right subject and the wrong author, or they don't deliver (or to your expectations) – so I don't commission unless I'm very confident about both the author and the subject.

Do you publish writing across the political spectrum?

We are perceived as left-of-centre, which is fair enough, but we do publish people whose politics are very different to my own: eg, John Carroll, Professor of Sociology at Latrobe Uni who's done work for the Libs in Canberra and is well known as a political conservative and is very interested in religious matters, which I'm totally not interested in. But we publish him, and we will certainly publish people whose politics are different but, again, only if I think they've got a highly persuasive, credible case to put.

What do you think makes for good issues-based writing?

There's no simple answer to that – it might be because an issue is hot; or the author is well known and the topic's current; and sometimes it's just because it's superb writing.

What immediately turns you off a piece of issues-based writing?

Bad writing; I'm constantly astonished at how much bad writing there is and how many people who can't write propose books to us. Writers need to be able to write, spell, punctuate and control their sentences. If they can't, it tells me this person can't write; they don't have the rudiments and don't pay attention to detail. In this area particularly, we want people who are in control of their material and can write well. Also, we look at the structure of the piece people are suggesting and whether it makes sense. We get a lot of material that looks OK on the surface but on closer reading doesn't actually stack up. We get a lot of proposals from academics, most of which we think have no prospects at all in general bookshops, and because we're a trade publisher we mostly reject them. We also get proposals for collections from different academics – my experience is that books like that are always box office poison – they don't suit our audience and there are too many different voices and approaches, so readers can't relate to any particular identity.

Do you prefer balance or a strong point of view?

I prefer a strong point of view that's well based and well argued. Balance usually means there's a lack of viewpoint. You need to be fair to the opposition, you have to be reasonable and civilised about it, but you also have to have a clear point of view. Many proposals fall down because they don't have this.

Tips

The first thing is if you're writing a pitch letter/proposal letter, make sure it's well written; if you can't get this right, how do you expect to get the publisher interested in the book? Secondly, go to the website first and see what the submission guidelines are for each publisher – make sure the book fits their list and guidelines. The piece must be based on fact and evidence; not opinion for the sake of opinion, unless you have a superb writing style and identity that can carry you – and that's very unusual.

Henry Rosenbloom, Scribe Publications

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