

## Nick Earls

An amusing anecdote about the Premier, an unfortunately shaped, blue glass award and giant smurfs began our entertaining evening with Nick Earls on Wednesday, 7 February. Nick talked about his experiences working with editors and publishers from other countries and having his works translated and Americanised.

His first book to be translated was *Zigzag Street*, and the ensuing emails from European readers bemused Nick. A Scandinavian law student found Brisbane ‘exotic’ with its houses up on stilts. German backpackers travelled to Australia to experience the Nick Earls Brisbane — particularly the regular order placed at Baan Thai in Milton by the novel’s central character.

The novel was first translated into German, and Nick felt honoured at having his very own German word coined just for this translation – *Brustansatzgeschihte*. At a public reading of the German translation, Nick read a part he’d read many times before. In English it usually took seven minutes, in German it took eleven minutes despite much practice. The laughs were in the same places — a good sign — but there were more of them. Was it the translation, or the accent? Nick is still not sure.

His second novel to be translated to German was *Bachelor Kisses*. He knew he’d already captured the German publishers because of the delightful little spot-laminate kisses all over the cover of the book. They don’t go to that expense if they’re not sure the book will sell.

It was a different situation, however, with the UK cover of *Bachelor Kisses*. A series of unfortunate events (thank you Lemony Snickett) meant that the book cover was published without Nick’s approval. Off-the-record comments about the ‘three towel test’ were well publicised and saw the Sydney Morning Herald publish the book cover before the book was published. Nick’s emails from overseas were all about the awful cover. In the UK, the Mirror called the cover ‘criminally bad packaging’. The embarrassment of reading a book with such a cover led more than one correspondent to tell how they tore the cover off so they could read the book on the Tube without shame.

Nick has his UK publicist to thank for that debacle. With tales of doorknobs and oversized sofas, (un)healthy tans and annoying peacocks, he was beginning to wonder if she was the publicist for him.

He met her new assistant, Bridget, when launching *Perfect Skin*, and began to think he’d found the right publicist. She was educated, interested, asked the right questions, and seemed genuinely excited about the new book. She looked familiar, but Nick quickly dismissed that as the talk about the book progressed. He was disappointed to discover that Bridget didn’t stay long — she was off to play the starring role in Bridget Jones’s Diary. ‘Bridget’ was Renee Zellweger studying up for the role!

It seems the ‘Americanisation’ of his novels provides the most angst for Nick. In 2000, eight New York publishing people read the novel *Perfect Skin*; loved it and wanted to

publish it ... their way. A few things bothered them, thinking of their American readership:

- Do we antipodeans really need to celebrate Christmas in summer?
- What is a pikelet?
- Could Indooroopilly be relocated to West End?
- Does the University of Queensland really need to be in St Lucia?

A most amusing issue, Nick pointed out, was their refusal to recognise that Australians use the metric system. Some way into the novel, the central character was three kilometres into his 5K run. Apparently Americans *do* run 5K, but they don't know how far 3K into it is! Nick met them half way with that one — the character was 'two miles into his 5K run'.

Nick reconciles these issues by saying that while human stories do travel, most stories happen in a place and to him it makes sense to ground the story in that place.

And just as we're used to importing a lot of stories from other countries, many other countries are pretty relaxed about importing things, working most of the specific references out one way or another, and living with those they can't.

(from Nick's website *Sunny Garden*: <http://www.nickearls.com> viewed 11 February 2007)

Nick says there have been fewer changes with subsequent books, but is unsure why this is so. Is it dealing with different editors? Is it because American readers are becoming more familiar with Australian culture — a legacy of Steve Irwin? Either way, it is a comforting thing.

*Perfect Skin* also had a trouble-free translation into Italian. Its title, however, translated into a rather long phrase that took up half of the book cover and pretty much provided the blurb for the book all by itself. The story appealed to a prominent Italian actor who approached Nick to say he wanted to play the lead character whenever the book was made into film. The film is now due for production in the next few months (with that actor in the lead role) and Nick gets to go to a film premiere in Rome — an experience he never envisaged when he penned his first novel.

In the question and answer session that followed Nick's talk, he described the benefits of having his publications in the school market. Class sets of books in secondary schools are a definite long-term money earner, and having books set as texts for university English literature courses is an honour.

Author, 'touring anecdotalist', 'part-time do-gooder' and actor: from play premieres in Brisbane to film premieres in Rome — it has been an amazing ride for Nick Earls, and we were lucky to share a little of the journey.

Wendy Abernethy