



## OMNIBUS BOOKS PUBLISHER ARCHIVE: AUSTRALIA'S FIRST INDEPENDENT CHILDREN'S PUBLISHER

**V**ANESSA NUSSLER tells us about how she created a 'finding aid' for a unique children's book archive with assistance from the National Centre for Australian Children's Literature.

I was delighted when Dr Belle Alderman AM, Director of the National Centre for Australian Children's Literature (formerly the Lu Rees Archives) at the University of Canberra, gave me the opportunity to develop a finding aid (guide) for the Omnibus Books Publisher Archive.

From my experience working in libraries with finding aids, I knew their value to researchers. Now I was about to delve into the creative world of the authors, illustrators, book designers, editors and publishers of Australian children's books. It was a privilege to be handling correspondence and manuscripts of well-known authors and to be viewing original artwork by popular illustrators. Learning about the process of editing, proofs, paste-ups and printing gave me a new appreciation of the publisher's world and those who create books.

In April 2015, the Centre ran a successful fundraising campaign to create a finding aid to the Omnibus Books Publisher Archive. Those who donated to this project recognised the historical value of this unique collection and its special place in the world of Australian children's publishing. With the funds raised, the project started in August 2015 when I was hired to produce the finding aid.

The Centre received the Omnibus Books Publisher Archive in 2004. Over three summers between 2005 and 2007, 27 volunteers, led by Belle, invested 950 hours to rehouse and accession the collection. This provided a great start to the creation of the finding aid, which describes the content of 111 archival boxes and 39 plan cabinet drawers.

Much of the collection had been arranged to reflect the publisher's working order, so their categories and terminology became the 'series' (collections of material) we used. As each stage of the publishing process used specific terms, acronyms and definitions, we agreed a list of these would complement the finding aid and guide researchers. Omnibus Books Publishing staff also advised on terminology and identified key roles of persons in the publishing process.

Most of the collection had already been safely rehoused in archival folders and boxes, but it required some further preservation and conservation measures. The National Archives of Australia website provided useful guidelines. Trove was used to fill in any information gaps.

The project presented many challenges, including evaluating and efficiently working through the very large collection, linking item descriptions included in different series, removing many staples from the documents, copying multiple fading faxes; and placing transparency slides and photographs in archival sleeves.



Rehousing Captain Cook

When I started the project I was provided with finding aids from other book publisher collections and I also familiarised myself with the Omnibus collection through earlier documentation and accession records – the equivalent of five reams of paper! Regular weekly progress reports to raise issues with Belle helped to solve many of the problems.

As I worked through the collection, I became more familiar with the key players at Omnibus Books. Documents and items revealed the specialised roles undertaken by individuals. From notations on manuscripts to signatures on forms, a picture of this unique publishing team emerged.



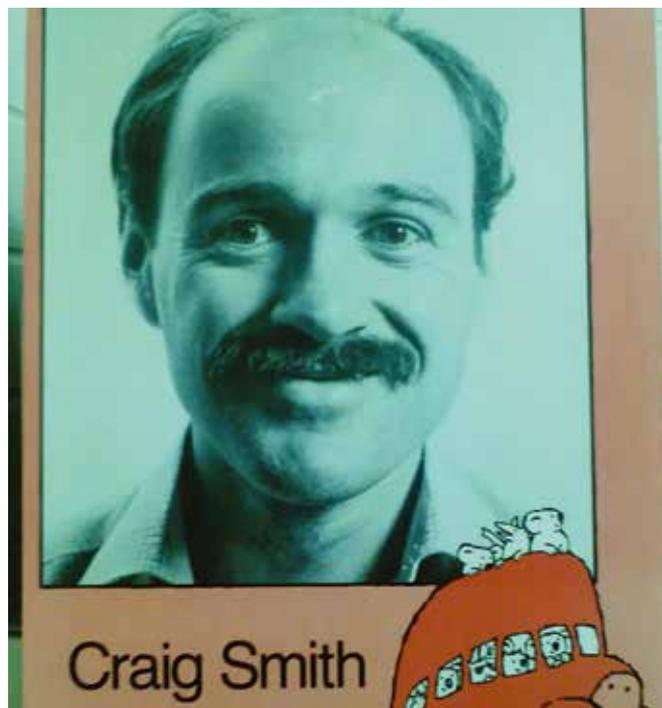
Time for Bed proofs

What was striking in the working documents from publishers and editors was a generosity of spirit when dealing with authors and illustrators. The correspondence showed that a special supportive working relationship developed between Omnibus staff and their authors and

illustrators whose work was accepted for publication. There were also copies of letters of encouragement and feedback that was often provided to those not accepted for publication.

The Omnibus collection demonstrates that drafting and rewriting manuscripts is an intensive process. The layout and design of the publication stage complemented the manuscript, involving the author, illustrator, art design manager, printer and publisher. The care, time and effort taken to produce the layout and design of book covers, text and beautiful illustrations was phenomenal!

In late 2015, the Centre received a large number of additional boxes from Scholastic Australia, which owns Omnibus Books. They closed the Adelaide office and consolidated Omnibus Books into their office in Lindfield in Sydney. The final stage of this project will be to continue the guide up to the end of 2015. This Archive then will offer a rich and historical insight into a particular time in publishing and the insights provided by the Omnibus Books Publisher Archive into children's publishing in Australia will be available for future generations.



Early publicity poster

The Omnibus Books Publisher Archive finding aid reveals the creative world of Australia's first independent children's book publisher. Here are fascinating insights into the collaborative process which produced some of Australia's most loved books, such as *Possum Magic*, *Rowan of Rin* and *Space Demons*. 

VANESSA NUESLER was the project Archivist. Her role was sort, organise and rehouse collection material while providing detailed descriptions in the finding aid. [nuessler@homemail.com.au](mailto:nuessler@homemail.com.au)

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