

The sad passing of a good friend

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Publisher Diana Gribble helped introduce Australian literature to the world. Picture: W.H. Chong

OBITUARY: Diana Gribble; publisher; born Melbourne, April 13, 1942; died Melbourne, October 4, aged 69.

by Michael Heyward

YOU can't understand Australian publishing without knowing about Diana Gribble.

She came to publishing almost by accident. Born in 1942, she grew up in a boisterous, supportive family where the key idea was to chip in. As a child she contracted rheumatoid arthritis. The year of school she missed may have seeded her love of reading. She dropped out of architecture at the University of Melbourne when she had a recurrence of the illness.

Perhaps abandoning her profession allowed her to find her vocation. She would invent herself as she went along. She once told me that she had never really imagined herself as a book publisher at all but always wanted to start a newspaper. Fulfilling that ambition lay in the future.

In 1975 she went into partnership with Hilary McPhee and together they created McPhee Gribble, the most stylish book publisher of its era. McPhee Gribble soon justified its existence by publishing Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip*. The company was brave, elegant and independent. It was a slap in the face to the reflex, which had haunted everyone from Henry Lawson to Christina Stead and Patrick White, that real books got written and published somewhere else.

McPhee Gribble established its office in a renovated warehouse in Fitzroy, Melbourne, with author pics, the famous sofa and a creche. And a Christmas party to die for. My main social aspiration in the early 1980s, as a baby editor of literary magazine *Scripsi*, was to score an invitation to the McPhee Gribble Christmas party. This was not an empty ambition. Those parties outstripped their legendary reputation.

McPhee Gribble thrived. Its list of authors was stellar: among them Tim Winton, Murray Bail, Kaz Cooke, Peter Cundall, Rod Jones, Jean McCaughey, Rodney Hall, Kathy Lette, Gabrielle Carey and Drusilla Modjeska. It became a significant supplier of talent to the publishing world. Robyn Annear, Patty Brown, Sophie Cunningham, Sue Hines, designer Mary Callahan all cut their teeth there.

When McPhee Gribble was sold to Penguin in 1989, the future had never looked bleaker for independent publishing in Australia. Di Gribble didn't see it that way. She partnered with Eric Beecher, who had recently left as editor-in-chief of *The Herald and Weekly Times*, and started the Text Media Group. Almost the first thing Gribble did was to set up Text Publishing, which in those days was a joint venture with the long vanished Reed Books.

I joined Text in early 1993. I was otherwise unemployable. I would not be a publisher now were it not for Gribble. She presented Text to me as a blank slate and told me to write on it. A week after she employed me I wrote a letter to someone and gave it to Gribble for her approval. I saw it back on my desk with the words *feel free* scrawled on the bottom.

For my part I couldn't believe I was allowed to sit at the feet of one of my heroes.

She sent me off to work with Peter Singer, who had never, until she signed *How are We to Live*, been contracted by an Australian house. It became a bestseller. She guided Hazel Hawke's *My Own Life* into book form. It sold in truckloads. And when she dissolved the joint venture with Reed so Text could stand on its own feet, there was no stopping us. The first book we signed was *Stiff* by Shane Maloney, which has never been out of print. Chong Weng Ho was our design guru. Beecher told us our editorial values were our greatest asset. Brown put her fingerprints all over the infant company.

And the enabler who superintended all of this was Gribble. She had that rare creative gift of making things possible for other creative people. Everyone could be themselves around her. She loved her friends, was generous, loyal and clear-minded. She was a graceful and wise mother to Anna. She and her husband, artist Les Kossatz, were a wonderful couple and Gribble was very close to Kossatz's sons Matt and Yuri. She loved art and had a great eye.

There are many memories of those days, first in our offices in Clarendon Street, East Melbourne, and then in LaTrobe Street. Signing the Chaser boys in Gribble's house and publishing the annual while they played table tennis on a nearby desk. Discussing the manuscript of Raimond Gaita's *Romulus, My Father* with her, a book that became a signature title for us. Locking Maloney in an office for weeks on end while he finished his next Murray Whelan novel. Working with Tim Flannery on his edition of the journals of Watkin Tench, another bestseller that came from the clouds. How could any of this have happened without her?

And all of this time, Gribble was across everything else Text Media did, from magazine publishing to the Melbourne Weekly.

She was the encourager, the healer, the person who picked you up and told you to get on with it. She was strong and warm and sensible. She never panicked, was never afraid of taking risks, and I laughed with her every day.

Text Media was sold to Fairfax in 2004. She did everything she could to help Text Publishing stay independent, as we planned our partnership with Canongate. Then she did her phoenix trick again and with Beecher founded another company, Private Media, publisher of Crikey.

Gribble was the deputy chairwoman of the ABC during the Brian Johns era, she was on the boards of Lonely Planet, CARE Australia, the Australia Council for the Arts, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, the Melbourne Major Events Company and Circus Oz.

She died the day we announced that Maureen and Tony Wheeler had invested in Text Publishing. The news would have made her happy. In our world of books and writing, you need a strong set of shoulders to stand on. With her vision and flawless imagination about other people, Gribble gave us hers.

Michael Heyward is publisher of Text Publishing.