

Reviewing the reviewer:  
What authors say about  
manuscript appraisal services

Amanda Gecko

This project was conducted in June/July, 2007, on behalf of the  
Queensland Writers Centre.

© Amanda Gecko 2007

## *1.0. INTRODUCTION*

Manuscript appraisal services in Australia have been described as the middleman of dreams,<sup>1</sup> man-handlers,<sup>2</sup> and something akin to The Ideal Reader.<sup>3</sup> According to Brooks, from Driftwood Manuscript Services, their role is to provide constructive, blunt and realistic feedback to best serve both the writer and the publishing industry.<sup>4</sup> Commercial appraisal services would appear to have grown out of a gap created by the publishing industry. As it has moved away from manuscript development for unpublished authors this function has become effectively outsourced with rookie writers bearing the cost.

So when did this happen? In 1998 it was reported that the first manuscript appraisal service in Australia had been operating a year.<sup>5</sup> Yet this assertion would seem doubtful because, prior to that date, both the Fellowship of Australian Writers and the now defunct National Book Council had been offering an appraisal service since 1992. Other sources have also indicated that in 1998 six organisations and three individuals were appraising manuscripts commercially.<sup>6</sup> Though it is true to say that while literary agents popped up in Australia in the '80s, manuscript appraisal services emerged here in the '90s, and have been 'springing up like mushrooms'<sup>7</sup> ever since. In the latest edition of *The Australian Writer's Marketplace*, under 'Writer's Services', 42 such businesses were listed. In its first edition, a decade ago, an appraisal category was not even included. Interestingly, manuscript appraisal services have been noted to be 'common in the UK and especially in Australia, though not in the USA'.<sup>8</sup> Yet whether this was indeed the case, and how and why the Australia situation in this regard has evolved differently, has remained unclear.

In 1999, a survey on manuscript appraisal services was conducted by the Australian Society of Authors amongst 13 agents and seven publishers.<sup>9</sup> Conclusions of this survey acknowledged that appraisals were a vital link in the publishing industry chain by seeking to strengthen the writing of emerging talent. Yet attaching an appraisal with unsolicited submissions was found to have little effect on any chances of publication. Only one agent had taken on an author of late who had included an appraisal with their submission, while no publisher was able to cite a recently released book that had arrived with an appraisal attached. Five years on, this situation was unchanged. Brooks, in noting the value of

appraisals, was quoted as saying, ‘Manuscript recommendation (to agents/publishers) through an assessment agency is not, in my experience, particularly effective.’<sup>10</sup>

Earlier Leigh had pointed out the benefits of appraisals were more subtle relating more to manuscript and author development than to immediate publication.<sup>11</sup> ‘Agents and publishers should not be the first readers of your work,’ she told us in 2000, adding that a genuine appraisal could provide authors with critical feedback that can assist in rewriting their work.<sup>12</sup> She went on to list a number of cautionary notes including the need to check the credentials of the agency or assessor, and whether appraisals were confidential.

Questioning the trustworthiness of these services would appear valid. Given the lack of a centralised professional association for the appraisal industry as a whole, the prolific rise of operators, and the often sizable costs for keen writers, the potential would seem ripe for unseemly practices. Indeed, warnings on industry scams have appeared often<sup>13</sup> with common advice being appraisal services are best avoided.<sup>14</sup> But the relevance to the Australian industry of such advice coming mostly from overseas has been unclear. Is our appraisal industry truly that suspect? If you would read between the lines, even insiders here have recognised questions posed by the rapid growth in assessors. Questions like: Where do all these people come from?<sup>15</sup> After all, anyone can claim to be an expert.

Significantly, an investigation into the manuscript appraisal industry has never been conducted in Australia that has included the end-users of such services—in other words, the writers. What do they say about the experience of having a manuscript appraised? Would they say this feedback is worth its cost? What is the cost? And the benefits? The pitfalls? Do appraisals help today’s author achieve publication? If so, how do they assist?

Thus, the following investigation was conducted to address such questions. In sum, its aim was to explore the writer’s experience of appraisal services to determine their credibility and usefulness, as well as to learn about the process from the writer’s perspective. It did not seek to be exhaustive research, but was more exploratory in nature.

## 2.0. METHOD

*2.1. Sample and Procedure:* Nineteen members of the Queensland Writers Centre responded to an e-bulletin requesting authors to share their experience of manuscript appraisals. These volunteers emailed the researcher and ten survey questions were sent by reply email. The attrition rate in responses was negligible since, from the total of nineteen who had originally expressed interest in participating, eighteen emailed back their survey answers. If any clarification of answers was needed, follow-up queries were also sent. The split between writers obtaining appraisals from agencies versus those dealing directly with assessors was about equal, as was the representation of each gender. Though writers were not asked directly, nearly all indicated in their answers they were unpublished. Eight survey respondents were users of appraisal services more than once: six had obtained two or three appraisals (at times for the same manuscript) while two others, at the time of writing, had booked a second. In total, 26 appraisals had been completed.

*2.2. Questions:* In line with qualitative research methods, the researcher initially planned to approach writers with a neutral request for information (eg ‘tell me about your experience of manuscript appraisals’) and to probe further based on responses. But QWC viewed this approach as being too broad, so instead the following questions were asked.

- What were your prior expectations of having a manuscript appraised?
- Did the reality of the exercise meet your expectations?
- Was written feedback substantial, detailed and credible?
- What sort of areas did feedback cover?
- What was the length of the report?
- How long did it take for you to receive the report?
- What was the cost?
- Was the exercise worth it?
- What did you gain?
- For other writers considering an appraisal what recommendations can you offer?

In addition, writers were told to feel free to give feedback not covered by the above.

### 3.0. RESULTS

*3.1. Analysis:* A thematic analysis was conducted after survey responses had been de-identified. Saturation point for themes identified was reached when sample size reached ten (14 appraisals) since cases after that point failed to reveal new information. This scenario indicates the thematic pattern observed was fairly robust since saturation point is more typically obtained when total case number reaches the twenties. In addition, quantitative descriptions (via summary tables relating to frequency) were devised for the variables of ‘length of the appraisal report’ and ‘the time taken to receive the feedback.’ Further, the cost of the report was analysed quantitatively by noting a median average.

*3.2. Main findings:* The main reason given for obtaining an appraisal was to gain an objective professional opinion of the strengths and weaknesses of a manuscript, as well as to obtain constructive criticism for improving its readability and chances of publication.

In obtaining an appraisal for the first-time, 11 out of 18 respondents were not prepared for the feedback they received expressing ‘surprise’, ‘disbelief’, or ‘shock’. For approximately half this sub-sample (ie six out of 11) these emotions related to expectations being exceeded by the high quality of feedback received. Interestingly, for the remaining half, these emotions centred on feedback being perceived as wanting or offensive. In sum, whether the experience was perceived as positive or negative overall, respondents commonly were not prepared for the content of the assessor’s report.

For 20 out of 26 appraisals, the exercise was reported as a positive experience. Conversely, two appraisals received a lukewarm response from respondents, while four appraisals were reported to be a negative experience. A positive experience can be described as one that was perceived by authors as having the potential to enhance their manuscript and/or professional development in a meaningful way. On the other hand, a negative experience can be described as one that was perceived by authors as having little value in enhancing their manuscript and/or professional development, or effectively was seen as harmful in some way to either. In a lukewarm response, authors conceded some aspects of the appraisal were useful, while other aspects led them to have reservations.

A positive experience of appraisals was associated with:

- written feedback that was detailed, substantial, and structured with sub-headings (ie plot, characterisation, POV, setting, dialogue etc);
- the assessor being a published author, or having relevant industry experience;
- comments provided on the strengths of the manuscript as well as its weaknesses;
- the assessor providing encouragement to the author;
- criticism being constructive;
- clear guidelines included for manuscript improvement;
- writers being clear from the outset about what the cost included;
- follow-ups being available in terms of the respondent being able to contact the assessor afterwards to obtain clarification of points mentioned in the report; and
- the author initially having researched suitable assessors/assessment agencies and having been recommended a reputable operator.

Conversely, a negative or lukewarm experience of appraisals was associated with:

- the assessor's analysis being shallow in both quantity and quality;
- the assessor's report being unstructured and generalist in nature;
- evidence existing to show the work had been skimmed rather than read carefully;
- an inappropriate assessor based on their background and/or the assessor having misrepresented their expertise;
- feedback that wasn't pitched appropriately for someone new to the industry and requiring specialised knowledge to be fully comprehended;
- no positive feedback or encouragement provided;
- no clear guidelines suggested for manuscript improvement;
- the reputation of the appraisal service being taken on face value given the credibility of its advertising source (eg ad in literature for writers' association);
- the reviewer taking offence or dislike to subject matter of the manuscript;
- the reviewer not providing a written report; and
- misunderstandings about what the cost had included.

Reports of a less than favourable experience deserve further detailing. Four in this category came from agencies while the other two involved authors directly dealing with assessors. If a linking factor exists, it was a lack of fit in some form between the assessor and the author's work or expectations. In three cases, the assessor and manuscript were clearly mismatched. For example, one assessor began their report saying, 'I personally dislike this type of self-help/New Agey writing...' Similarly, another mentioned the appraiser got 'personal' and critiqued her rather than her work after offence was taken at its content, which was confronting in its take on sexuality and violence. (Note use of the word 'personally' or 'personal' here. Could this be a clue perhaps regarding the extent of professionalism?) The third case involved a fiction manuscript being reviewed by someone whose sole background was later found to involve work as an editor for a technical journal. The writer felt, perhaps rather rightly, the assessor had misrepresented their level of expertise. Moreover, this inappropriate background resulted in feedback that, according to the author, was a 'page-an-a-half of poorly constructed generalist advice.'

The remaining three cases involved a mismatch between the author's expectations and the reality of the exercise. For example, in paying \$600 to an agency, one respondent expected her fiction piece to have been read more carefully. Yet, to provide one example of how this expectation was unmet, the story's setting was a non-English speaking country and one character said, 'I do not speak English'. The assessor wrongly noted no prior hints had been made to suggest this aspect of language. However, the author has conceded some aspects of this appraisal had been useful. The fifth case involved misunderstandings about what a \$300 fee covered for appraising a story for children. From the agency's website, the writer obtained the impression the fee included 'up to four collaborative rewrites' until the story reached a publishable standard, whereupon for an additional \$100, a letter of introduction would be sent to publishers. Such expectations were unmet. But the appraisal was found to yield some useful information, in addition to some assuming prior knowledge to be fully understood. In the sixth case the writer paid \$250 to 'a university lecturer' expecting their work to be fully appraised but received no written feedback. Only spelling and grammar corrections had been jotted on pages of his work. In noting these cases, however, it should be borne in mind that the vast majority agreed that feedback was credible, substantial, and detailed, and voiced no complaints.

Table 1: Length of the appraisal report

No. of pp in report	Number of appraisals with that report length
1-3	6
4-7	11
8-12	3
13-25	3

Table 1 has depicted the differences in the length of the appraisal report across the sample (NB, the number of pages in the report wasn't always noted by respondents). Report length varied markedly being anywhere between a page-and-a-half to 25 pages. Notably, the appraisal for each of these extremes cost exactly the same - \$450.

Table 2: Time taken for appraisal report

No. of wks	No. of appraisals taking that long to be received
1-3	6
4-8	11
9-12	3

Table 2 has depicted the time taken for respondents to receive the appraisal report (NB, again this detail was not noted by all respondents). It was apparent that the time factor also varied significantly across the sample with reports taking anywhere between 1-12 weeks.

Because appraisal costs differ according to manuscript size, comparing costs across the sample was difficult. However, for a 60 000-75 000 word manuscript, appraisal costs varied from \$62.50 to \$900 with a median average of \$450. Notably, the cost did not relate in any meaningful way to whether respondents found the experience to be positive or negative. At times cheaper prices were associated with happy outcomes, while at other times not, and the same with higher prices. Also, as noted, one report that was a page-and-a-half cost the same as another that was twenty-five pages. In other words, the old adage 'you only get what you pay for' did not seem to apply. The cost factor did not emerge as a reliable indicator of whether appraisal services were ultimately found useful.

Was the exercise worth it? Perhaps not surprisingly, respondents who reported a positive experience found the exercise as money well-spent while those reporting a negative experience found it a waste of time and money. Those reporting positive gains mentioned getting a new perspective on their work from an objective source and professional guidance for rewriting it. They also mentioned learning more about specific aspects of technique (eg dialogue, structure etc) and being encouraged and inspired to continue. Furthermore, the fact that nearly half the sample had more than one appraisal

completed in itself probably speaks volumes about whether appraisals were viewed by writers as a useful investment. One respondent had spent close to \$2000 in appraisals. Was it money well spent? 'Certainly,' he said, 'I've accrued enough critical acclaim to get an agent.' Similarly, another respondent mentioned being directly linked to an agent through her appraisal provider, though at the time of writing, she had not been signed.

On the other hand, respondents who had a negative appraisal experience were often adversely affected up to ten years later. Two of these respondents even used the same word in describing their experience i.e., 'crushing'. Becoming 'very depressed' was also mentioned, which was intensely destructive to the creative process. For both these writers, who had received an appraisal that was more a personal response from assessors than a professional one, the appraisal experience also became personal. Interestingly, across the sample, regardless of whether the experience was perceived as positive or negative overall, a similar pattern in emotional responses was observed. After initially feeling shocked or surprised at the appraisal's contents, a negative flattening of emotion was common which varied from being simply downhearted at work that lay ahead to full-on depression. Typically, it was not until these emotions had been worked through before any rewriting could commence, in one case, ten years later. In effect, many respondents described a post-appraisal depressive syndrome that could be mildly disabling, and where assessors had demonstrated a lack of objectivity, the general pattern could be severe.

Advice for other authors contemplating an appraisal of their work fell broadly into several themes. Most of the authors strongly recommended 'taking the plunge' and obtaining an appraisal. As one noted, 'an assessment is an investment not only in your manuscript but also your development as a professional writer.' Another pragmatically noted that 'sending your work to a private assessor who is frank is better than sending it directly to publishers before it is ready.' The value of obtaining more than one appraisal for the same piece of work was additionally acknowledged. Comparisons could then be made, it was noted, across reports, and agreement in any problems could be identified. The need not to approach the exercise blindly was also stressed. To find a reputable operator, it was advised, ask other writers or writers' associations for recommendations, and always check credentials. Several respondents, however, noted the difficulty here with agencies (compared to dealing directly with assessors), in that the assessor was

anonymous so checking their background would be impossible (though the agency's reputation could be a guide). Finding an appropriate assessor was also emphasized, given the individual needs of the author. For the best outcome, it was generally agreed to locate a professional who was familiar with your genre, narrative style, or broad non-fiction area (eg science, New Age etc). Aspects of language, knowledge, and formatting can vary significantly with each type, so selecting an industry specialist was thus preferable. Many also warned appraisals 'were not for the faint-hearted'. 'Be prepared for frank comments,' it was said repeatedly, and 'don't get too disheartened.' Similarly, some respondents mentioned while you need to be prepared to take feedback onboard, trust your instinct. As one writer put it: 'Remember what you set out to do in the first place.'

#### *4.0. DISCUSSION*

Perhaps the most significant finding here was that manuscript appraisals were found worthwhile by the majority of the sample. The main reported benefits were industry guidance for professional and manuscript development as well as much needed author encouragement. A much smaller number of survey respondents had also been successful in linking to an agent via the appraisal provider, though a publishing contract had not yet been realised. These benefits were noteworthy in light of manuscript appraisals generally receiving poor press on the Net, where constant warnings about the latest scam feature.

However, adverse findings on industry standards were also revealed. While many service providers were obviously hard-working (with authors providing detailed cases of labour-intensive dedication), it was equally obvious that dubious operators exist. A few writers—fortunately a small minority—provided woeful cases of industry misconduct such as an assessor who was perceived as having misrepresented their level of expertise. Given the potentially profound and long-reaching outcomes for authors personally, financially, and creatively, the issue of professional standards would clearly be worthy of further investigation in a more large-scale, focussed project. Such findings also have highlighted a need for authors seeking appraisals to heed advice offered here by voices of experience: obtain recommendations from other writers or writers' centres; ask questions. Be careful.

In a similar vein, another salient finding was the inconsistency in the level of service received for the price. An appraisal report offering a page-and-a half of generalist advice costing the same as a detailed one of 25 pages would seem an odd state of affairs. Yet maybe, in time, this situation will change as reputable operators in this field form a centralised professional association (as literary agents did in this country some years ago). As that way, standardisation in recommended fees-for-service could be implemented.

Similarities and differences between assessors and authors regarding the way appraisals were viewed have also been highlighted by the data. For example, authors have advised matching appraisers to individual needs, advice that has been echoed from industry insiders. Cook, for example, from The Manuscript Appraisal Agency has recommended anyone seeking appraisals to contact service providers to ensure what was offered met the client's expectations.<sup>16</sup> Some assessors, he explained, 'have an editorial focus while others might focus on writing or have a publishing perspective.'<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Brooks has advised that 'genre writers require assessors that understand that market'.<sup>18</sup> So writers and assessors have agreed on that score, as they generally have also regarding the goal of the exercise. Feedback that was honest, constructive, and objective was cited here by authors as the goal of the exercise, one fortunately shared by many assessors.<sup>19 20 21</sup> Yet authors also stressed an added need in wanting to be nurtured. It was just as important to have strengths pointed out as well as weaknesses; for feedback to be simultaneously honest and encouraging. A report that was brutal rather than simply honest was not viewed as constructive because it can be immobilising creatively. In sum, a coach who instructs *and* inspires would seem preferable to one who just shouts about inadequacies.

That most authors were not prepared for the appraisal they received was perhaps another surprising finding. It seemed difficult to know how this scenario might be prevented in future. Perhaps service providers could provide a mock report beforehand as way of an example of what sort of feedback could be expected in terms of structure, length, the mix of honesty and nurturing, and the general approach. Yet where authors were pleasantly surprised by the high quality of the report received this would seem a non-issue anyway. However, where the appraisal fell short of author expectations this scenario could also be prevented by authors taking responsibility in discussing expectations upfront, to ensure they match the way that assessor/agency operates.

That many authors sought multiple appraisals was another unexpected finding. The benefit of multiple responses for the same piece of work was reported here as relating to the ability to compare reports so that similarities in any problems identified could be noted. This was viewed as countering the subjectivity of the appraisal process via a process akin to finding commentary consensus. What do industry insiders say about this? Cook<sup>22</sup> has reported that around ten percent of returning clients seek a review of the same manuscript, though he sees ‘a higher percentage’ returning with a different piece of work. Unless the original version of one manuscript was very strong, he has said, a publishable standard would unlikely be reached in one re-write. More typically, anyway, cases of returning clients have involved taking novice writers to the next level of understanding so that lessons learnt can be applied to the next project. Also, setting one appraisal against another for the same manuscript, he said, loses the point regarding the opportunity that an appraisal presents. ‘It is as a resource’, he has said, ‘and should be treated as such.’

Cusack,<sup>23</sup> from Louise Cusack Manuscript Development, has similarly estimated about fifteen percent of clients have returned for a second appraisal on the same manuscript. Some even have sought a third review for the same work but these clients have been referred on. (‘My fresh eyes would be used up’ she explained). She has suggested obtaining another review for the same manuscript from a different assessor if unhappy the first time, but has noted that continually rewriting work that has been knocked back by publishers would not be as productive as taking what you have learnt and moving on. She has also noted the most publishable manuscripts tend to need only appraising once.

So for rookie authors seeking instant publication, a first-time manuscript appraisal would seem unlikely to deliver an agent or publisher. Indeed, the survey respondent who spent around \$2000 on manuscript development before securing an agent’s contract would seem closer to the mark. This conclusion would be in keeping with the survey of agents and publishers nearly a decade ago, which concluded the main role of manuscript appraisal services related to the long-term professional development of emerging authors.

It should be noted that findings here have been limited by important sampling considerations. Two service providers of manuscript appraisals accounted for more than half the appraisals completed (and notably, these service providers were associated with positive experiences). Hence, had the sample included appraisals from a wider range of

service providers, a different pattern of results may have emerged. Thus, more research in this area would be required before any definitive statements could be confidently made.

These findings have raised questions about current trends in the journey of new authors. How long does it typically take to achieve publication status? And how much would have been invested personally and financially beforehand? What types of objective review (eg writers' groups, workshops, manuscript appraisal etc) were found useful, and under what conditions, and for whom? Such questions could form the basis of future investigations.

## 5.0. REFERENCES

- 
- <sup>1</sup> J. Sullivan, "The Work Assessor: Middleman of Dreams", *Sunday Age*, 5 December 1999, p.12.
- <sup>2</sup> J. Leigh, "The Man-Handlers: Who's Reading You?", *Australian Author*, August 1999, pp 21-25.
- <sup>3</sup> K. Brooks, "What To Look For In A Manuscript Assessor", *Writing Queensland*, June 2004, pp 6-7.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> P. Rolfe, "How To Write The Right Stuff", *Bulletin with Newsweek*, 9 August, 1998, Vol. 117, pp 63.
- <sup>6</sup> B. Cook, Letter to the Editor, *Writing Queensland*, February 2005, p8.
- <sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*
- <sup>8</sup> Website of Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America Inc, nd, at [www.sfw.org/beware/services.html](http://www.sfw.org/beware/services.html)
- <sup>9</sup> J. Leigh, "Getting Appraised" in R. Whitton (ed.) *The Australian Writer's Marketplace 2000*, (Melbourne: Bookman, 2000), pp577-579.
- <sup>10</sup> Brooks.
- <sup>11</sup> *Op Cit.*
- <sup>12</sup> Leigh, Getting appraised.
- <sup>13</sup> Eg T, Harper, "Are Book Doctors Legitimate?", 2004, at [www.taraharper.com/faq\\_edit.html](http://www.taraharper.com/faq_edit.html)
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Cook.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

---

<sup>18</sup> Brooks.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Cook.

<sup>21</sup> L.Cusack, interview with researcher, 7 July, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Cook, interview with researcher, 7 July, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Cusack.

*Notes:*

The researcher is a psychologist with a background in health research and the development of group-based psycho-educational programs for behavioural change. She has no conflict of interest to declare.

Thanks must also go to the following for their assistance: the writers who so generously gave of their time to participate in the survey; Brian Cook and Louise Cusack for taking time on a Saturday to answer questions, including all the nosy ones; and Jeremy Fisher from ASA for assisting with references.