

# Questions answered

by Christine de Portugon

Q: How did this idea come about in the first place—to form a co-operative that's become Phoenix Press?

A: I can't remember who first thought of it. It was the result of various inputs that came out of discussions on what needed to be done to get past the dreadful state the publishing industry got itself into over recent decades.

Q: What dreadful state?

A: Indeed. Few are aware that it's let itself run into the ground from lack of maintenance and preparedness to change with the times. It still won't accept that it's finished. All the ground rules have changed in such a way that the carpet has gone out from under conventional publishing. If they don't want to move on, we'll do it for them.

Q: But why a co-operative?

A: You really mean why not? They dignify the participants and give them a fair go. The fact that there aren't more co-ops in Australia tells me that the idea of a fair-go is largely a myth we cling to. It's dog-eat-dog these days, if you haven't noticed. Phoenix has a collection of talented people who can't afford to spend three quarters of their working lives dealing with the bureaucratic nonsense publishing means these days. They want to write, not waste

their time defending their talent to people who don't have any. I'm French. We value our artists. In Australia, they can die of hunger for all anyone cares. Not so at Phoenix. We're doing things differently.

Q: Why so many titles coming on stream over the next six months or so?

A: It's over the next twelve months really, since some works are ready now for publishing, others nearly ready and others are advancing to that stage. Three of the four writers on board so far, in cell one, don't write a single book at a time. They'd love to be able to do just that, but the Muse doesn't think that's a good idea in their cases. It's nice to knock out a book every nine months if there's a bit of research involved. It means more work for me because all three have to be monitored constantly to see that things are moving along. If one slacks off, it means the others are propping him up. If that happens, I'm the one at fault.

Q: What about the fourth fellow?

A: He's a poet. ... What do you want?

Q: Point taken.

A: But he does some wonderful short fiction that borders on a French version of the Twilight Zone.

Q: Are the writers of a like mind about what constitutes literature?

A: Probably not. But I don't let them hang themselves over that, or anybody else. Being intelligent people, they share views on man's plight in this present age, and it colours their work, as it must. Not one of them is a hum-

bug fan. In fact their views on the nonsense we accept in our lives are quite uncompromising. And that's as it should be. They're writers, not ventriloquists, journalists or organ-grinding monkeys.

Q: Phoenix doesn't do just any sort of stuff. What's its main fare?

A: Very serious comedy bordering on tragedy. It's hard to tell the difference most times.

Q: I'm not with you.

A: We don't do crime stories. There are enough murders and rapes going on without us inventing more. We entertain by means of combining the humorous and the tragic. Life's a game, but many see it as a tragic game. There's no specific genre in that but it keeps the boys busy. Hamilton was the class comic at school. He still has the scars of wounds dished out by humourless religious both male and female. He has a keen eye for the absurd and never runs short of material. Only recently he asked me what writers block was.

Q: What did you tell him?

A: I told him that it occurs when you reach a point where you realise you had nothing to say in the first place, or have forgotten what it was. I help them back onto the original thread. There's a little boy in every man, you know, not just the pig most people detect at second glance.

Q: Do you have any plans to set up a blog to build a rapport between readers and writers?

A: It's on the drawing board for sometime next year. I don't think it's a good idea for writers to talk about their work until it's finished. An alternative to the blog is a cheap or free ebook for readers to explain the experience of writing the book they've just read. I encourage the lads to keep notebooks on what's happening as they write so that a 'making of' type book can be assembled after publication. Hamilton uses it as the vehicle for working his storylines and plots. So he has ready-made books like that for his *Thunderbolt* and *The Far Country* trilogy. In the latter particularly, readers will be asking for some sort of elaboration on the interpretations he's placed on the shortcomings of the Bible's New Testament.

Q: So what can an enthusiastic reader do to get some feedback from the publisher or writer end?

A: Email us, and I'll see if the writer can find time to answer the questions by that medium. I'll put the responses on the website for others to benefit from the Q&As. When Hamilton was an academic, he made a point of having his door open for students. He hasn't changed much since those days. And Lynne is of a similar bent; a man generous with his time and ideas. As for Lawson, he's only too happy to have a yarn to anybody, especially if she's good-looking. He's from Bogan Gate, but he's no relation of Henry Lawson's, so he says.

Q: What about Paul Perrot?

A: His English is limited, alas. I translate his works. I'm happy to translate responses to readers providing the questions to him are compact and to the point.

Q: You mainly traffic in eBooks, I understand, with Print-On-Demand when ordered.

A: Yes. The bulk of the traffic, as you call it, will be through Amazon and the others, but we'll sell directly from this website when we've set it up for that.

Q: I thank you for your time.