

playing a different game

SAUL ALEXANDER talks to the owners of the new publishing house, Pantera Press, and finds out why they think they can compete with the big wigs of Australian publishing.

Our board-room is our kitchen table,' says Alison Green, one of the directors of Australian start-up publishing house Pantera Press. She is referring to the genesis of her company, as well as the way it currently operates. I am speaking to her and John Green, her father and partner in the business. Three-and-a-half years of research and planning – in the family kitchen, around Australia and overseas – and they are finally ready to publish their first books.

So why start a new publishing house in an industry that is both high-risk and low-return? The answer is simply that the Greens love books and reading, and that they feel there is a gap in the market. 'We're trying to play a different game,' say John. There are multiple prongs to their underlying philosophy, but they sum them up with their slogan: 'Good books doing good things'.

The fundamental component is obviously the 'good books'. 'We want to find the next generation of great Australian authors,' John tells me. Pantera Press is one of few Australian publishing houses that accepts unsolicited manuscripts from unpublished authors. In fact, they welcome them. While other publishers refer to these manuscripts as a 'slush pile', Alison and John prefer the term 'diamond mine', and they are clearly excited about what they've already been able to dig up.

Pantera's release schedule for 2010 gives some idea of the kinds of books they're looking to publish. They describe Robin Baker's *Killing Richard Dawson* as 'an edgy, slow-burn thriller with black romantic-comedy undertones'.

Sulari Gentill's *A Few Right Thinking Men* is based on real events during the Great Depression. According to the blurb, it 'takes the reader into a world of art, money, crime and treason'. Eschewing the idea that only literary fiction is worthy of attention, they are

seeking writers with broad popular appeal and long-term commercial potential.

Once Alison and John find an author, their priority is giving that person the best chance of success that they can possibly have. They employ a radical business model that sees book profits split fifty-fifty between publisher and author. While writers don't receive an advance, and will therefore earn less up-front, their long-term earning is potentially greater than it would be from standard industry royalties, which are usually in the region of 10 per cent. The Greens see this as an investment in writing talent. 'If any of our authors can give up their day jobs and write full-time, we would be overjoyed.'

Authors are also given greater-than-usual influence in the publishing process, including input into book covers and marketing campaigns. Alison and John outsource the editing and design to professional freelancers, and strive to ensure their books are as professionally presented as those of the world's largest publishing houses.

For distribution and marketing purposes, Pantera have teamed up with Simon & Schuster Australia. Lou Johnson, Simon & Schuster's managing director, describes their relationship as a 'genuine partnership', and says they are working much more closely together than is traditional in a publisher-distributor relationship. 'We were really excited by their vision for the business,' she says. 'They have all the right ingredients to be very special.'

Just because they are aiming for popular appeal, it doesn't mean that any of their books will be 'dumbed down', and this is particularly evident in the non-fiction series they are about to launch, 'Why vs Why'. Each volume of this series addresses a hot issue in current affairs, giving two experts on opposing sides of the debate equal space to voice




Alison and John Green

their arguments on the topic. The first two volumes cover gay marriage and nuclear power, with many more planned. Alison explains that the idea originated in her family's own debates around the aforementioned kitchen table. She hopes that the series will provide an accessible and unbiased guide to issues that many people find complex or confusing.

The 'Why vs Why' series is part of the 'doing good things' aspect of the Pantera slogan, but another part of it is their determination to be involved in charitable work. A visit to Far North Queensland brought them into contact with Aboriginal children who had been let down by the school system, and they were saddened to realise that many of these children would struggle to engage in the wider community because of illiteracy. And so they are

always on the lookout for charitable projects that seek to improve literacy, or projects that seek to improve quality of writing, promote reading or foster debate and ideas. Already they have been supporting Let's Read, an initiative of the Centre for Community Child Health at Royal Melbourne Hospital and the Smith Family, as well as sponsoring the Walkley awards for journalism and a recent tour by American satirist P J O'Rourke.

The longer I speak to the Greens, the more convinced I become that they know exactly what they're doing. Their ideas are exciting, and they seem to have both the knowledge and the energy to achieve their aims. I look forward to the day when I can walk into a bookshop and see the three slashes of the Pantera Press logo peeking out at regular intervals along the shelves. 

www.panterapress.com.au

