

# A Kind of Romance

by Susan Curry



*In December of 1983, when I was in between careers and casting around for ideas as to what to do next, we visited my former American History professor and his historian wife, who were in retirement at beautiful Byron Bay in northern New South Wales. "Try importing Australian books to the U.S. and setting up a mail order business," one of them said. The other agreed that there was a real gap in knowledge about the southern continent, and that I could help fill that gap.*

**I bought a large suitcase**, filled it from bookstores in Sydney and Melbourne, and came home to Davis, energized by the idea. It took a while to understand how mail order worked, to learn to design catalogues, to find potential customers, and to make contacts with Aussie publishers who would honor my orders. I'm not a person who seeks the limelight, and I hadn't much business experience apart from doing daycare years before, but I forged ahead, trying anything that looked interesting or remotely possible.

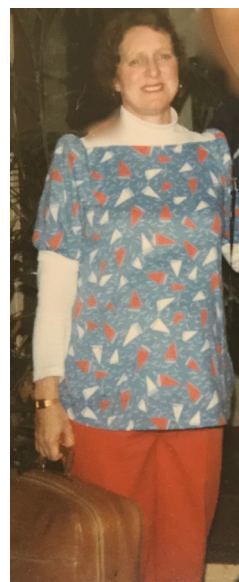
I smile now at my naivete when, very pregnant, I heaved a large basket of books to the 31st floor of the Qantas Building on Post Street. My goal that day was to convince the trade department of the Australian Consulate to put my catalogs in their lobby. And my catalog? 11" x 14" goldenrod, folded to make eight pages, densely typed and without illustration.

I had my bright red maternity pants on that day, the stretchy kind of course, with a white coverall top decorated with blue and red sailboats. I was

not easy to miss. Phil Grassley, the trade commissioner greeted me with an amused smile and promised to put out my catalogs. I was in heaven.

The baby duly arrived, and my mother came to visit. One day there was a knock on the door: it was the Australian Consul-General, who just happened to be going by Davis on I-80 and was curious about this new book business he'd heard about. What a scramble! I brought him in via the front door while my mother disappeared into the family room with the little cherub. As I entertained the important visitor, we both pretended not to hear lullaby sounds from the other room. I thought later that it would have been more natural to keep Susanna on my lap and introduce my mother, but I was confused how one should behave with a Consul-General. He probably wondered why I pretended not to have a baby.

Ignorance can lead to flying too high. In October 1985, I found myself sitting in the lobby of the St. Francis Hotel, eye to eye with the director of Australia's government publishing house, impeccably dressed, probably late fifties. I was in my late thirties, the bright, ambitious owner of The Australian Book Source, excited about the



prospect I saw before me. I had what he needed: knowledge about Australia, combined with exposure to the U.S. market. He had what I craved: a great list of books. If only I could be his distributor, I'd have it made.

We eyed each other over

***Me, pregnant with a large suitcase of books.***



*My resourceful husband then proceeded to drive the forklift backwards all the way to our house.*

tea and cookies, talked chit-chat. He was taking a long time getting to the point, I thought. While I was waiting I happened to mention my small baby at home. He never did get to the point. Soon afterward he rose and, shaking my hand pleasantly, said “well, I’m sure your business beats doing the housework, doesn’t it?”

Over the wonderful, chaotic years that followed, my business edged its way up a steep learning curve, and provided amusement, if not a regular income, for our family. I look back fondly at the day in 1987 that 25,000 copies of “Kakadu Man” arrived at our curb in a shipping container, all 800 boxes of them. I’d managed to convince the publisher in Darwin that I could be a reliable distributor. Someone else was to be in charge of promotion. We had engaged a Davis Lumber forklift driver to unload the pallets, but that morning the driver’s wife had a car accident and he couldn’t come. What should we do?

“I’ll go,” cried my resourceful husband, who then proceeded to drive the forklift backwards (because he couldn’t find the forward switch) from Covell and F Streets to our house on Redwood, unload every last pallet and slide it deftly

into our garage. We have photos of that day.

We don’t have photos of the day that 17,000 of those copies had to be sent back to Australia. The PR guy in Los Angeles (who’d been paid three grand a month) had done absolutely nothing, with the result that “Kakadu Man” was still a gem waiting to be discovered by Americans. I went to a book conven-

tion in Washington DC, gave out posters by the hundred, appeared on a TV ad, collared everyone who passed my booth, and sold perhaps fifty

copies. I don’t remember exactly what happened to the rest; it was selling well in Australia and the publisher probably asked for several thousand at a time to be sent back. Memory loss can sometimes be a good thing.

A small home business can be hard to separate from family life. There were the phone calls in the middle of the night from unaware Australians.



*In winter, I froze at my desk in the garage while sorting and packing books for shipment.*

The 5:00 a.m. calls from the east coast. Dinner calls from a publisher who gave me mentoring, material help, and friendship from 7,000 miles away. The excitement of each new piece of technology: first the Osborne with its 5-inch square screen and loaded with my very own Wordstar program. Then my beloved versions of Mac: 64 K and progressively faster, the fax machine which I regarded as magic, and the PageMaker lessons which I never quite understood.

In winter, I froze at my desk in the garage while sorting and packing books for shipment. I got fit from running miles from the garage to my computer upstairs. There were the book conventions, the book reviews, the kitchen table covered with bills, receipts, checks. Eventually I did make a decent sum from selling U.S. rights to a couple of desirable children’s books, and koala books to San Diego Zoo. It was enough to pay a couple of semesters of one daughter’s college fees and made me proud, but overall I wasn’t too interested in the bottom line.

I was living the dream of being a bookseller on my own terms. Eventually Australian publishers teamed up with Americans as well as the traditional Brits, to promote their front and backlists, and the arrival of Amazon made my rather inefficient business model unnecessary. But I’ll never regret that busiest time in my life, my romance with books. I picture my bright-eyed, adventurous, and brave self at that time with a sense of gratitude, wonder, and delight. ◆

**Sue Curry** was born in Melbourne, Australia and has lived in Davis for



over forty years. She has imported, published and written books, all with an Australian theme. She recently retired from a separate career as a psychotherapist.

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