



Reading between the whines

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Their work shifts millions of books but best-selling writers can feel neglected, writes Helen Pitt.

Best-selling author Di Morrissey has sold more than 2 million copies of 17 novels but it wasn't until her fourth book that a major Australian newspaper reviewed her work. Even now, she feels only begrudgingly accepted in the literary world by virtue of her prolific output.

Literary lightweight is a title that weighs heavily on the juggernauts of popular fiction – four of whom are guests on this week's *Jennifer Byrne Presents* for an episode titled "Blockbusters and Bestsellers".

Byrne has assembled the rock stars of popular writing: Morrissey (her latest book is *The Silent Country*); New York-based Lee Child, author of the 14-book Jack Reacher series (the most recent is *61 Hours*); Bryce Courtenay (*The Power of One* is the best known of his tomes); and Matthew Reilly, the author of 10 action books (the latest being *The Five Greatest Warriors*).

"Blockbusters and Bestsellers" is a departure from Byrne's usual format and emerged because the program had a dream team of best-selling authors – the "heavy artillery of the bookselling world" as she calls them, despite the fact they are often "on the nose" to critics.

"There is this perception about popular-fiction authors that because we write a book a year that we have cracked some code," Morrissey says. "And all we have to do is sit down at the page and the words come out, just like I sprayed them on with hairspray," she says from her Byron Bay home where, when she's writing, she toils seven days a week from 6am to 6pm.

The four writers discuss how their books are often dismissed as having less literary merit than a shopping list, how Child (real name Jim Grant) chose his pen name because "C" is early in the alphabet, high on shelves at eye level and, as a surname, Child has warm, fuzzy connotations.

They each give their nomination for the next Nobel Prize for Literature, the importance of their names in gold letters and how an author need not be at the mercy of the bookstore browser.

So why are their books so popular?

"Because our books are easy to read," Morrissey says. "However, this is considered by some to be less worthy than creating dense, hard-to-read books that no one reads."

She reminds publishers that if it weren't for the income of popular writers, there wouldn't be the money to publish smaller-selling literary writers.

Above all, Morrissey says of the show: "This is not a debate for the literary establishment that goes off into literary la la land – it's for real readers of popular fiction."

Jennifer Byrne Presents airs on Tuesday at 10.05pm on ABC1 and Sunday, May 16, at 6.30pm on ABC2.

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