

Mother knows best

Book agent Selwa Anthony has built a stable of best-selling writers through a 'unique business model', as one of them tells **Steve Dow** – 'She runs on love.'

SATURDAY night in Sydney, early spring, high above Market Street in the Swissotel's Blaxland Ballroom, some of Australia's popular-fiction writers are seated around 20 large tables with their editors and publishers. They venerate the tiny, dark-haired woman who steps on stage. Her message: don't talk shop; get cosy and personal.

Star signs would be an approved starting point. She's a Scorpio, daringly wrapped in a full-length stretch satin, ruffle collar and polka-dot trimmed dress. She thanks her designer, Moss and Spy, then her beauty therapist, hairdresser, nail person, personal trainer and her mate, the trouper Toni Lamond, before reminding her audience: "We're here because of books. Never forget that."

It would not have been surprising had the audience responded "Yes, mother" to Selwa Anthony, daughter of Lebanese migrants and Cowra drapers, one-time innovative bookseller, long-time champion of Australian writing and still besties with author Colleen McCullough, who nudged her down this road as a book agent.

Anthony's mother could spin silk from worms and now she weaves success from her family of authors. The clan may be big and unwieldy but mother knows best. "Let's take that dreadful 'literary' word away from publishing," Anthony says. "Books are *entertaining*."

As she hands out her 18th annual batch of "Sassy" awards to her writers – statuettes that might be

taken for a vampy Anthony holding a book aloft – she urges Allen & Unwin, HarperCollins, ABC Books and Hachette publishers, all present, to scan the room. "No one here is boring, are they, Tara?" she says. The former fashion model and Canadian-born crime writer Tara Moss is seated up front, her pregnancy swaddled in slinky red.

"Bossy, isn't she?" mutters a fellow back on table 20 who's lucky to be here considering Kate Morton is also in the back row, on table 18. Morton's third novel, *The Distant Hours*, was released in hardback in Australia, the US and Britain in November after her first two books, *The Shifting Fog* and *The Forgotten Garden*, sold more than 3 million copies, her writing championed by Anthony, to whom Morton's best mate, author Kim Wilkins, introduced her. Anthony "has a unique business model," explains Morton. "She runs on love."

Friend and children's author Mark MacLeod says Anthony denounced email, then got an email address but is loath to give it out and prizes face and telephone contact, though her website gives no clue how to make this come about: "She believes, 'If you're really meant to work with me, you will,' which sounds arrogant but I know what she means; 'If you want me, you will get to me.'"

The ABC newsreader Juanita Phillips accepts her Sassy with husband Mario Milostic and confesses Anthony swung them a book deal when they had no more than a title and an idea. "Selwa's the



Popular touch Selwa Anthony is a great champion of best-selling fiction. Photo: Craig Peihopa

kind of agent you want on your side," says TV scriptwriter and *Domain* columnist for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Jimmy Thomson. "She's created her own corner of Australian publishing, which is actually more relevant to the

majority of book readers in Australia than all the literary wank fests put together."

The prized "pink" Sassy is awarded to Moss, who declares on stage that Anthony is "like family to me" and reminds her of her latest

character Great Aunt Celia, "supernaturally young, never ages, dresses elegantly ... gives great advice".

Back at her table, Moss explains: "She's very direct and straightforward. I respect that. I'm a very

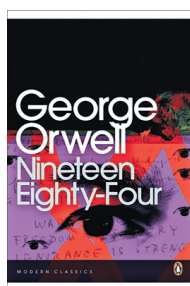


THE SAT 0004

MARK WATSON THE BOOKS THAT CHANGED ME

Nineteen Eighty-Four George Orwell

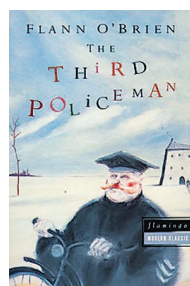
I read this when I was 14 and, like a lot of teenagers, was blown away by it. As an English student, you're mostly forced to read Shakespeare and novels in which people ride horses a lot and conduct love affairs in ballrooms. It's thrilling to find a "classic" novel that feels relevant to your own world. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, despite its flaws, continues to look more prophetic than almost any other novel of the



20th century. Which is a shame for the world, probably, but gratifying for Orwell fans.

The Third Policeman Flann O'Brien

Not many people have read it but those who do never forget it. A wildly inventive, surreal, stupid and fascinating journey through a nightmarishly crazy world, it was probably the book that most made me want to become a novelist. Also, as a masterpiece that wasn't even published until after O'Brien was dead,



it's a good lesson to aspiring writers about having faith in their work, even if they never see the results.

The Magus John Fowles

I studied English at university and, although this is a valuable experience in many ways, it does have the effect of changing your relationship with reading. The idea of reading any book for pure fun, without po-facedly analysing its "themes" or trying to "contextualise" it, can vanish from your mind.

