

A Foot in Two Countries

by Roben Schaerf

G'day mate. As a native Aussie living in California and trying to write for an American audience, I often find myself caught up in an odd mix of expressions, cultural differences, and ways of stringing words together to pass as acceptable speech. I revert to my native language, blending Americanisms with Aussie expressions, when under stress or in the deepest emotional aspects of my storytelling. Without my critique group I'd be lost. They circle the weird expressions and write, "what does this mean?" Then I give them my best wrinkled brow, puzzled gaze, and say, "How come you don't know?" Then it hits me; I'm not speaking their language. With a foot in both countries (I travel to Australia every year or two and all of my family live there) it's hard to remember who takes title to which phrase or expression.



'Strine' – Australian that is – is a weird conglomeration of languages. Of course, the original language was primarily British. The "land down under"

was a penal colony and settled with people from the British Isles in 1770. Those inhabitants fell into three distinct groups: the British Officer and his family, the less than glamorous convict, and the native Aboriginal. Aboriginal people had lived on the land for over 40,000 years and had a culture, belief system, and distinct language, with words like "billabong" (a waterhole in a dried up river bed), "boomerang" (a curved flat wooden instrument), "bunyip" (a mythical bush spirit), "yakka" (word for work), and "woomera" (stick used for throwing spears). The British language often had no name for the strange environment, or unfamiliar land, flora, and fauna – new words were invented using Aboriginal expressions combined with the slang of the early convict settlers.

Some Australian words have a different connotation in America. For example, a rubber is not a condom, it's an eraser. Oops! I learned that the hard way, blush, blush. Some words have been shortened beyond recognition, for example, afternoon becomes "arvo" and a "fag" is a cigarette. The letter "h" is often dropped by the Aussie, and most speak with a slight nasal sound. We also put "an" in front of words like historian, whereas an American uses "a." Not a good thing when writing to the American audience. Ahh, I have so much to learn...sigh. Then there is spelling. Centre becomes center; programme becomes program; theatre becomes theater. But what do you do when The Sydney Harbour finds its way into your writing, yet in America the word Harbour is spelled Harbor?

The only difference between city and country folk in Australia is the speed of speech, but a few colloquialisms come to mind. In the state of Queensland they call a suitcase a "port," whereas in my home state of New South Wales, if we packed a port it would be liquor. Queenslander's say "eh?" after everything...like our Canadian friends, aye? Aussies drive on the left hand side of the road and our car's trunk is called the "boot" – we use the metric system so miles are measured in kilometers, and acres are hectares. Many words have had a vowel added to the end, making everything into a diminutive; for example, Hell's Angels become "bikies." Of course, if you're going to have a bash at writing about a good old Aussie "mate," or "bloke," you must also pepper your words with a good dose of expletives. A separate discussion, and way too wild for these pages.

The Australian language, like American, is forever evolving. Last week my mother used an expression I'd never heard – it was 'hoon' and refers to a hooligan, or yahoo. Guess it comes from hooligan and larrikin, which were in vogue in my youth, but maybe, on second thought, it's just an Aussie abbreviation for the word hooligan – I mean, who needs to say the whole word when it can easily be abbreviated, eh? – Language! – No worries! We'll figure it out!

Roben Schaerf is twice published in women's fiction in Australia. She works hard at learning the craft of romance writing and is in constant pursuit of the elusive American contract.