

A black and white photograph of a hand reaching out from a sleeve, with large colorful text overlaid.

BWFF

1962 2022



**First Nations people are
Australia's first storytellers.**

**Brisbane Writers Festival is held
on the lands of the Yuggera and
Turrbul people, on the banks of the
Maiwar river. We recognise the
important and ongoing contributions
of Indigenous Australians to art and
literature, and pay our respects to
Elders past, present and emerging.**

BWVF

**Celebrating 60 years
of the Brisbane
Writers Festival**

1962

2022



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Ellen van Neerven



Foreword

Trent Dalton

Easy to find the story place. South of New York, west of Brazil, take a right after the Tyrannosaurus Rex. Follow the sound of laughing and weeping and awe. Stories everywhere there. Stories up my street and up my sleeve. Oh, the places I did go inside that story place. Kurilpa Point to Paris and London. South Brisbane to Berlin and back again. From the State Library of Queensland to a certain state of mind, a lemon-coloured sunshine state of bliss for a broke but only half-broken Brisbane teen. A place that existed outside of time and the 522 bus back home to Bracken Ridge.

Once a year it comes around, like your birthday and summer solstice and the night before Christmas. Just a few big rooms inside a public library that open up to anyone, and then a private room that opens up inside your mind. Malouf built a door to that sacred room for you once. Lucashenko built four walls for you. Geraldine Brooks breezed gently in through the window once. A thousand brilliant international writers dropped out of the clouds and fell inside that room for you because that room never had a ceiling.

All those sacred stories that landed in your heart and in your ear. The ones I heard about my easy-breezy brown snake river that I loved so much; the Maiwar stories that bent and twisted back 60,000 years through time. Stories of war and dust and flood and fire-coloured roof rust. Stories true enough to change your mind. Stories deep enough to turn your life around. Dark to light. Wrong made right. Stories that cut and maimed and severed and made you dizzy and knocked your socks and block off. Stories about the places in my blood.

Lightning storms over Moreton Bay. Fat flatheads in my seas. Flattened cane toads in my cul-de-sacs. Bridges for stories. Creeks for breakfasts. Wounds that won't heal. Bloodstains that won't wash out. Low-buried bodies brought back to life. Burning bitumen summers and iced lemon cordial over fresh-cut Saturday afternoon lawns and the bent back-yard clothesline arms that swung every Brisbane kid who ever wrapped themselves inside a pillow-case cape and dared to dream of making a literary motsa out of mind flight. That festival made me fly. Stories that flew across mango trees and orange-brick breweries and red-bellied black snakes hiding in bushes. Stories that travelled all the way across the world and back again, only to land smack-bang inside your ear and in your lap and in your private room and, in this very moment dear reader, in your hands.

This wondrous story in your hands. The sixty-years-in-the-baking story of the Brisbane Writers Festival. This sixty-year celebration of the story place. This is the story of the people who built those beautiful private rooms in your mind. It's a story of community and commitment. It's a story of a city punching far above its weight, a city that was born from Indigenous pain and brutal penal-colony punishment, a city that, much like our mighty Maiwar, will not be rushed as it bends and twists its way through ideas and controversies and wondrous discoveries and stories upon stories, on its long journey to something closely resembling pride.

This book is a door built just for you. This book is four walls that were built just for you. This book is a private room inside your mind. This book is a window that's been left open just for you. All you have to do now is breeze on in.

Welcome to the story place.

Preface

Sarah Runcie
CEO, Brisbane Writers Festival 2020-22

This is not a history. This is a celebration. A celebration of all that makes the Brisbane Writers Festival unique and important.

Held for the first time on the last weekend in September 1962, in the rooms of the Brisbane Women's Club, the Warana Writers Convention, nonetheless, made history. That first gathering of local writers and enthusiastic readers became the Brisbane Writers Festival, the oldest continuous writers festival in Australia.

It is not for no reason that Brisbane can lay claim to such an illustrious cultural institution. Queensland, and in particular Brisbane, has been home to some of Australia's finest authors and poets. It is also home to a vibrant and supportive reading community that has attended and volunteered for the festival over the sixty years of its life.

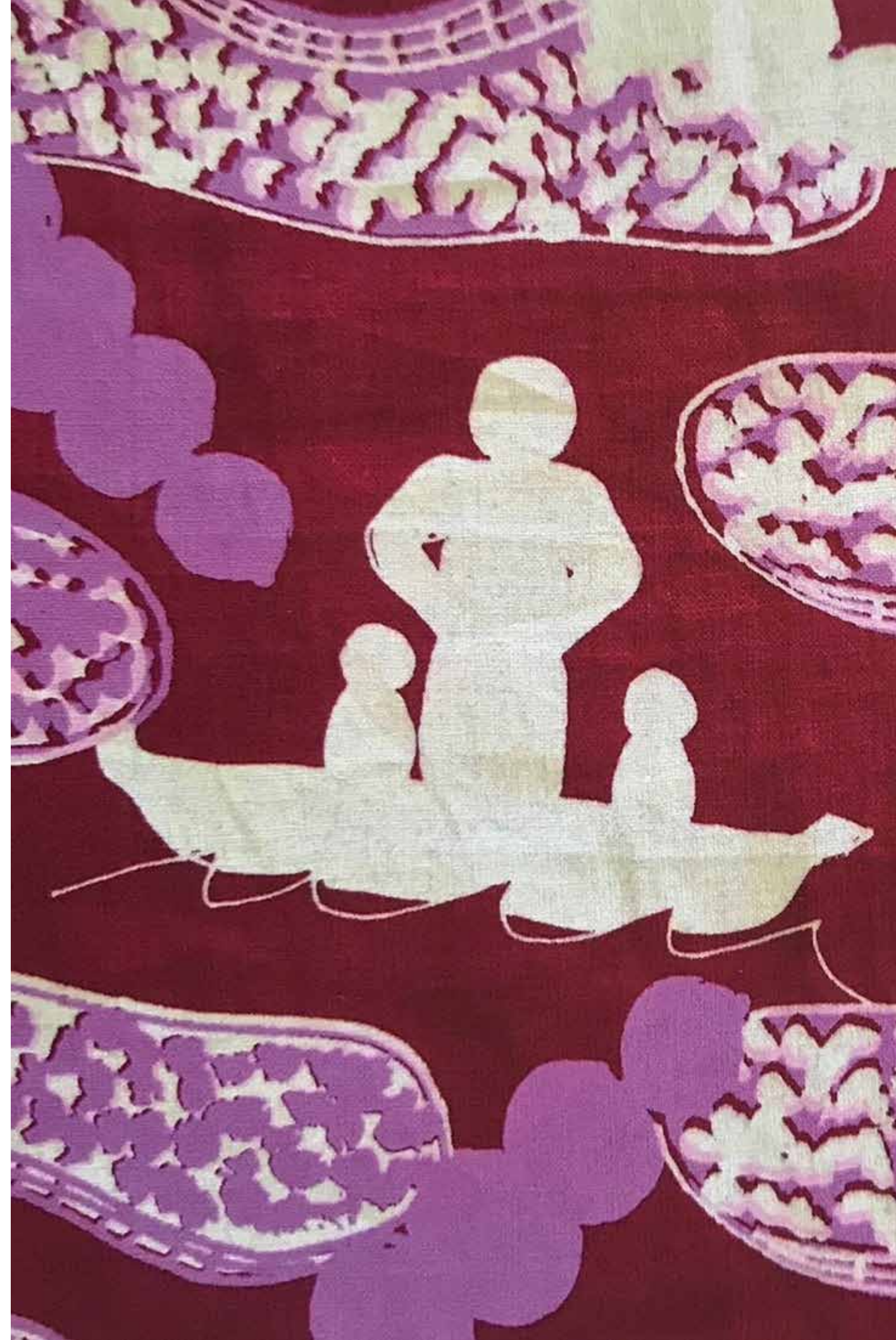
This book is a collection of commissioned pieces, interviews, memories and reflections on a festival that has launched books, careers, public discussions and the occasional controversy, and meant so much to so many.

Most of the contributors have written especially for this book. Ellen van Neerven has provided their inaugural First Word and Last Word addresses, delivered as the opening and closing of the fifty-ninth Brisbane Writers Festival (7-9 May 2021). All contributors have generously given of their time and care.

As with all festivals, there are many thanks due. This book would not have been possible without the financial support of Paul Taylor and the Taylor family, and the Brisbane City Council. It would not have been possible without the support of the Board of Brisbane Writers Festival and its visionary chairs, Fiona Taylor and Justice Thomas Bradley.

A particular acknowledgement is due to Emily Bowman, who tirelessly shepherded this book to publication.

Enjoy this celebration of the Brisbane Writers Festival through the power of the written word.





An Inclusive Space

Vicki McDonald AM

State Librarian and CEO, State Library of Queensland

I love seeing authors deep in thought, absorbing the atmosphere at a Brisbane Writers Festival. It is at once meditative and exhilarating.

Will their ruminations within the soaring architecture of State Library of Queensland transform into a beautifully crafted sentence or inspire a global bestseller?

In 1928 Virginia Woolf asserted that “a woman must have money and a room of her own to write ...”

But once the final full stop is in place, all writers need readers to inhabit their worlds and wrestle with their ideas.

So, we need another room. A space that is inclusive and welcoming, bristling with creative and curious minds that are fascinated by the possibility and tensility of words and ideas.

And that space would surely be a writers festival or library.

A place where you can glance up from your coffee and see Mem Fox or Trent Dalton chatting to a friend or festivalgoer in an urgent, animated fashion. Somewhere stacked with books and buzzing with a sense of creative possibility.

State Library has proudly hosted numerous Brisbane Writers Festival events over the years. And, each time, I read something new, learn something different and hear something life-affirming. That is such a gift, especially in these complex times.

In 2019, before the pandemic took hold, I welcomed American writer Ann Weisgarber to the festival stage. And I would often see her happily soaking up the energy of the festival, her face replete with contentment. During her event Ann said writers had “a responsibility to show how we can be better people”.

“We have an obligation to make something better if we can.”

It is a sentiment that fuels all our endeavours at State Library.

As the Brisbane Writer’s Festival marks its sixtieth birthday, State Library celebrates its own significant milestone: 120 years of serving Queenslanders. And we do so in many surprising and creative ways.

For us, storytelling extends beyond the written word and the books on our shelves; it is embedded in our carefully preserved treasures, showcased in our extraordinary exhibitions and events and brought to life by our expert staff.

I congratulate the festival on this significant anniversary and encourage all Queenslanders to embrace the pleasures of reading and storytelling.



Sarah Holland-Batt and Anisa Nandaula

Introduction

The Honourable Justice Thomas Bradley
Brisbane Writers Festival Chair of Board

Ellen van Neerven writes of the many footsteps that have preceded us on this Country we are standing on. On the traditional lands of the Yuggera and Turrbul people, the first storytellers on the banks of the Maiwar, the footprints of the Brisbane Writers Festival are slight. These lands and waters have been filled with culture for tens of thousands of generations.

In this volume, the brief perspective of sixty years allows us, like Kris Kneen, to hold up a puny thumb to the festival.

Jackie French shares memories of the 1963 festival, hearing her father speak, and seeing her heroes Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Judith Wright. Craig Munro recalls Peter Carey's first festival appearance: in a marquee in the City Botanic Gardens, the newly published author's address was interrupted by a thunderstorm, punctuated by bolts of lightning and the high-pitched screeching of fruit bats.

Laurie Muller tells how an event "for writers, by writers, with limited public access or interaction" was opened to the public over forty years ago, so audiences could see and hear authors, and ask questions in public sessions or at book signings. The changed festival drew in readers. Some became writers. Many became festival presenters and panellists. Steve MinOn reveals the powerful impact of a question from Alexis Wright.

Bob Johnson shares his slides, dropping names from forty years of festivals.

Maxine Beneba Clarke glimpses festivals in the twenty-teens: "moments of surprise, pride, connection, abandon, absurdity, solidarity and questioning". For Rosalie Ham, the writers seemed "a little more unstitched, amused and amusing" on balmy Brisbane nights.

Aspiring writer Edwina Shaw saw Nick Earls and Venero Armano at their first festival. Sue Gough recalls the same panel, including Andrew McGahan, performing professionally, despite savage reviews of Nick's and Veny's short-story collections in that morning's newspaper. Nick Earls tells of turning up in his old school uniform, after reading the review, to discover the same national newspaper was sponsor of the panel session.

Thomas Nelson has a volunteer's view of John Marsden holding school students spellbound at Word Play. Rhianna Patrick was drawn to the festival by Love YA, "a day filled with book love, followed by dinner with a community who love talking about books!" For Sally Piper the festival is a place of connections.

Sue Gough also remembers the festival's engagement with writers from China, starting with four survivors of the Cultural Revolution. She describes pre-festival retreats on Fraser Island/K'gari provoking debate and open dialogues that continued long after the festival ended. Mirandi Riwoe cherishes rare and fleeting encounters with Val McDermid, Matthew Reilly and Peter Temple, and crucial connections with fellow writers about common genres and issues of the day.





Robin Sheahan-Bright saw Janette Turner Hospital, Peter Carey and David Malouf returning home to the festival. A galaxy of international writers attended, including Marina Warner, Yan Martell, Marilyn Duckworth, Peter Porter, Seamus Heaney, Philippa Gregory, Michael Noonan, Libby Houston, Alexander McCall Smith, Amani Al-Khatahtbeh, Jonathan Franzen, and Min Jin Lee. Phil Brown recalls Lionel Schriver's hot-hatted festival opening-night appearance that fuelled discussion at the festival and around the world.

Vicki McDonald remembers an inclusive and welcoming space where Ann Weisgarber spoke of "an obligation to make something better, if we can".

Zoe Pollock tells how she could barely sleep the night Angel's Palace went up in the Maiwar Green. Designed by Gordon Hookey, the 12-metre-high structure was inspired by the world of Alexis Wright's epic *Carpentaria*. It was the stage for Alethea Beetsen's adaption of the novel, with technical production by Bill Hazard. The "trust, collaboration and imagination" showed "the astounding creative energy and talent to be found in Brisbane".

Such energy and talent are recalled in these pages. The Brisbane Writers Festival has produced exceptional experiences, connected people from diverse communities, and brought stories to life. Festival experiences also encourage us to look with openness and respect at thinkers, authors and artists from ancient times to the present, to see important questions from many sides and to be aware of biases and sceptical of truths lit only by the passions of an immoderate age.



In 2021 the
Brisbane Writers
Festival introduced
the concept of First
Word and Last Word
– an opening and
closing piece from
a First Nations
author, to “reflect
the vibrant legacy
of Indigenous
Australian
storytelling and
recognise the
importance of
putting First
Nations voices
first”. Ellen van
Neerven was the
inaugural presenter
of First Word and
Last Word.

1The First Word 2021 Ellen van Neerven

Jingeri -

It is my cultural obligation to acknowledge the Yuggera and Turrbul people as the Traditional Owners of this land and that this always was and always will be Yuggera and Turrbul land.

I’m from the Yugambeh Nation. Our totem is Mibunn the wedge-tail eagle. We are neighbours to this Country. Within the Yugambeh Nation, my family belong to the Mununjali clan between the Logan and Albert rivers. In recent times this place has been named the Scenic Rim.

As Auntie Desley, a Mununjali Elder who will be part of the festival says, yes, our land is very scenic, but it’s time to call the Scenic Rim a Yugambeh name.

I’m very proud to be a Murri from this region. I’ve lived in other places and been around the world but I could not see myself anywhere else. This is home. This is everything to me.

I’m glad to have the First Word and I get to have the Last Word too.

It does feel very symbolic, very significant and very humbling to bookend the Brisbane Writers Festival in 2021.

I’m going to start by reading you a poem I was asked to write for a public artwork in Fish Lane, through BlackLash, a First Nations company based in Brisbane. If you’re familiar with this area, just across the road, you’ll have noticed that there is a new opening to Fish Lane on Melbourne Street, next to the Fox Hotel. In Fish Lane Town Square, there’s public art by local First Nations artists. In my case, a poem etched into the cement, the etching follows the shape of the river, and the creation snake. The poem can be read two ways, from either entry. There’s space for the poem to continue because the poem and the story of us is a poem and a story that will never be finished. The poem is in itself an acknowledgement of Country and a declaration that we have always been here and we are still here, continuing the practices of our Ancestors.

Opportunities to infiltrate the built environment with our narratives remind me that just because there is concrete and buildings doesn’t take away from the sacredness of Country. Country is Country no matter how urban, and we are standing on Country that many footsteps have been on. Your footsteps, my footsteps, our footsteps.

Our Elders say we have been here
since time immemorial
this soft elbow of the river
is a place of gathering
camp, culture and trade
this land is infused with our architecture
we traded fish, we hunted kuril
with tides, floods, big winds
respect for every living thing
by the river crossing

we traded catches
 fish, crab, shellfish and prawns
 mobs came in from everywhere
 to meet along the banks
 our old people want you to remember
 the lines drawn down
 do not cross!
 we were chased away
 they pushed out mob here
 when it gets hot, the sweet scent
 of red gum
 wild flowers, creepers
 we flow back like magnets to this place
 gathering and belonging in city streets
 measure time through changes
 the air, the smell, the animals
 the butterflies
 new shoots pop up
 dark roots of the mangroves
 shaping place through story
 we burnt bright
 until they invaded
 lights were on
 and then they faded
 when we come back, we come back strong
 we light fires outside and in
 speaking against colonial interruption
 keep stoking that spark within
 we are still here
 we always will be
 our cultures are strong
 respect for every living thing
 this is a yarn
 from time immemorial
 about our survival
 thrival and revival

It is in living memory that our people were prohibited to come to town, to enter shops, pubs, other places, to speak their language, practise culture, vote, have a say. There were grave implications for some who fought to have a voice and speak out. So I think it's very important to reflect on these histories of harm and exclusion, in some ways ongoing, when we talk about who is included and represented. All understanding comes from understanding of place and what's happened here on this place.

It was my mother who first introduced me to books. She has worked in several libraries as a library technician.

As well as looking after books, my mum boasts a variety of talents, excelling in sewing, arts and craft, poetry, and has recently ventured into stand-up comedy. My mum brings people together and is welcoming to all people.

She, and my grandmother, Nanny, demonstrate that a lack of educational opportunities is no barrier to being resourceful and deadly, and their hard work and grace inspire me every day.

Through my parents' encouragement I went to university and completed a degree, although they were perhaps a little worried when I chose creative writing over some other options that could be seen as providing a better chance for stable employment.

But it was writing that I wanted to do and it was that I did. At the time I was to yet to fully understand that writing is older than pen and paper and words in English, an imported language in this country. That writing is much older than that. Writing lives inside of me and is an extension of my culture and of me as a proud Yugambeh person. In the footsteps of giants, I walk.

I've been coming to this festival for over a decade now. My first years here were years where I would meet the people who would shape me into the person I am today - some of those people are here - in the crowd. I found my creative freedom and my responsibility to help others find theirs.

I am in very good company in this festival program. There are thirty-two First Nations writers at the festival this year.

Alison Whittaker, Anita Heiss, Uncle Bruce Pascoe, my cuz Chelsea Watego, Cheryl Leavy, Evelyn Araluen, Fiona Foley, Gary Lonesborough, Grace Lucas-Pennington, Jasmin McGaughey, Leah Purcell, Lisa Fuller, Loki Liddle, Megan Davis, Meleika Gesa-Fatafehi, Aunty Melissa Lucashenko, Nardi Simpson, Rhianna Patrick, my cuz Samuel Wagan Watson, Thomas Mayor, Victor Steffensen, Aunty Beryl Johnston, Aunty Pat Williams, Annette Simpson, Katherine Collins, Aunty Lyn Smith, Aunty Susan Knight, my mother Maria van Neerven-Currie, Aunty Desley Denaro, Uncle Albert Holt and Uncle John Brady.

There may well have been names I've forgotten and I apologise for that. But without a doubt, we are well represented, as we should be.

A deadly mob of writers, and there will be many a yarn spun over the weekend. A patchwork of yarns, a cloak of yarns that promise to keep you warm on the chilliest of mornings and evenings.

Thirty-two is a significantly large number and I don't want to downplay that significance but at the same time I don't want to exceptionalise it - even though there were not thirty-two First Nations writers on the program twenty years ago doesn't mean there weren't thirty-two local First Nations writers that could have been doing exactly what I'm doing - in 2021 we've just got thirty-two seats at the table, we've got a platform, and that's great.

Tonight I'm honouring the thirty-two in 2021 and the thirty-two in 2001 and the thirty-two in 1962 when this festival began. (See, I've done my homework.)

For me this writers festival has always been a sacred place where I have learned to be a better writer and a better reader and a better listener. To be bold and to be gentle - at the same time.

Please don't limit your reading and writing to books. Reading is reading Country. Reading emotions. Writing is writing letters. Love letters. Reference letters. Petitions. Resumes for friends. Shopping lists for relatives. Every word I write strives to be important. Whether it's on a Post-it Note or etched in the concrete. Whether it's in a book or in a card. Whether it's said to thousands of people or whispered to the Ancestors.

If you, like me, were given the gift of listening, reading, writing and telling stories, you know it's a responsibility. You can use that gift to make a difference for your family, friends and community. Please do that. Please give voice to your emotions, your beliefs and your dreams. Write against fear. Write against hate. Write towards love.

Write with purpose and write for your community in a world where we too often prioritise the individual over the collective project. Working collectively is what sustains me and this is reflected in the variety of events I'm doing at the festival.

My sessions include launching a short-story anthology called *Flock*, which begins with a beautiful artwork on the cover by Papunya artist Kuluka McDonald, of redtail cockatoos, flying in formation, and covers twenty-five years of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fiction.

A poetry night, aptly called All I Have Is a Voice, where I will be reading alongside my legendary cousin Samuel Wagan Watson.

The Knowledge Keepers Poetry Circle, where I will be introducing eight Inala Elders, all women, amazing aunties whose poetry will knock your socks off.

And back here, at the closing, for the Last Word, where I will tell you what I learned this weekend, about being a better reader, and a better writer and a better listener, while on stage, on the page, in crowds and sitting on the grass by Mairwar.

Over the festival, the humble notebook will become a source of weaving. A meaningful writers festival begins with a smoking ceremony. A meaningful writers festival begins with acknowledging Country, Traditional Owners and Elders, and continues this acknowledgement in every session and continues this acknowledgement after the session and after the festival. A meaningful writers festival is grounded and embodied. Is three-dimensional.

Don't just be a spectator and voyeur to our stories. Know that our lives and struggles continue after this weekend. Reflect on our words. Reflect on the prints your footsteps make.

Bulgawan.

Warana Writers Week, 1988

Laurie Muller

The 1988 Warana Writers Week launch of the David Unaipon Award for unpublished Indigenous writers, created by University of Queensland Press (UQP), was held outside the new State Library, under the shade of the huge poinciana tree beside the Brisbane River in the area known as Kurilpa by Aboriginal people. Oodgeroo Noonuccal (formerly Kath Walker), a co-judge of the award, was to conduct the launch and UQP extended an invitation at large to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait authors. At the scheduled time few people had arrived and we became anxious. But then, in ones and twos, aspiring and published Indigenous writers quietly began walking in and a crowd swelled. Oodgeroo gave an impassioned speech that had a palpable impact on all. Sam Watson, the black activist and published novelist, also endorsed the award and urged his people to engage with it. It was a special moment for us all and the legacy of the Unaipon Award is now there for all to see in the Indigenous Writing list at UQP. This catalogue includes award-winning writers, many of whom had either won a Unaipon Award or had their careers launched by their entries, such as Melissa Lucashenko (Miles Franklin), Doris Pilkington (AM), Larissa Behrendt (Commonwealth Writers Prize), Alexis Wright (Miles Franklin), Tara June Winch (New South Wales and Victorian Premiers), Ellen van Neerven (New South Wales Premiers), Tony Birch (Victorian Premiers), Ruby Langford Ginibi (Human Rights), Herb Wharton (AM and Australia Council Lifetime Achievement), Sam Wagan Watson (New South Wales Premiers), Lisa Fuller (Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year), Fiona Foley (Queensland Premiers), Jackie Huggins (AM) and Eve Fesl (AM).



Jasmin McGaughey and Ellen van Neerven

2A Sense of Place

Zoe Pollock

The Brisbane Writers Festival has immense power to connect people with meaningful stories and experiences. As CEO and Artistic Director from 2017 to 2019, I aspired to create those “a-ha” moments for our audiences, the ones that evoked that look of pure joy or emotion as they became engrossed in others’ words. As an arts leader, my hope is that people will leave an event feeling changed – through learning something new or feeling connection to an artist’s perspective.

My aim was to diversify the perspectives being amplified on our stages, the festival being a critical amphitheatre for the ideas and debates of our contemporary nation. The first priority was to ensure that Indigenous authors had a strong presence. Queensland has played a leading role in publishing and fostering First Nations writers. I wanted to showcase and celebrate that, as well as the role of Indigenous people as our first storytellers. So in 2017 we featured a whole stream of First Nations writers, including Alexis Wright, Tony Birch, Claire G. Coleman, Sam Wagan Watson and Melissa Lucashenko.

At the heart of this celebration was Angel’s Palace. The concept was to bring the world of a novel to life. I wanted audiences to feel that they were literally walking into the book, immersed in its imaginary world.

Being the Brisbane Writers Festival, it felt right that the featured work should be from Queensland. Alexis Wright’s monumental *Carpentaria* was the natural choice. A work of mystic realism that blends Aboriginal Dreaming with English literary tradition, Wright’s words evoke imagery rich enough to inspire any visual artist commissioned to decorate a 12-metre-high dome structure. This dome on the banks of the Brisbane River would hold the physical world of the novel.

In order to establish such an ambitious work, it was critical we had the input of leading members of Brisbane’s Indigenous community. Dr Sandra Phillips graciously accepted our invitation to chair the inaugural Angel’s Palace Advisory Committee and was joined by Cheryl Leavy and Amanda Hayman, who provided critical guidance and creative input into the direction of the project.

When I rang Alexis, full of nervous energy, to ask her permission to celebrate her book, and she accepted, she suggested that Gordon Hookey should create the artwork to be digitally printed onto the dome. This was serendipitous. Through pure coincidence, Gordon was the artist I already had in mind. He accepted. He had always wanted to work with Alexis.

First, I needed to fund the project. This was something outside the BWF’s usual program and therefore not in the budget. I met with a key festival supporter, Paul Taylor, who had fond memories of attending BWF with his mother and family. He was willing to support Angel’s Palace with a generous donation. The Taylor family’s generosity demonstrates how arts philanthropy can unlock ambitious and daring work that would otherwise not be possible.

At last, we could commission an artist to create the immersive world of *Carpentaria* inside the dome. Alethea Beetson, Kabi Kabi and Wiradjuri artistic director of Digi Youth Arts, and an exceptionally talented theatre-maker and director, agreed to adapt the novel for a stage show. Bill Hazard, a talented technical producer, joined BWF, working on the technicalities of decorating the dome’s interior with found objects and digital projections of artworks on its ceiling.

When the dome structure was erected on the Maiwar Green, I barely slept. My team and I had not seen the printed artwork and were concerned about the quality of the reproduction. On a budget as tight as the festival’s, we had little room for error. But as we rounded the corner from the Queensland Museum, we saw a vibrant, beautiful dome shape rising up between the stately Gallery of Modern Art and State Library of Queensland buildings. Gordon had created an incredible depiction of a snake’s nest, curled around three nuclear eggs to represent the site where Angel Day builds her house, her “palace”, in *Carpentaria*. Emotions ran high when Gordon visited to see his work magnified on the dome. Later in the week, as we opened the show Alethea had created for a special preview, I looked back to see Alexis Wright surrounded by Elders from the Gulf of Carpentaria (whom we had flown to Brisbane), looking up in astonishment and pure joy at the projections of Gordon’s snake serpent weaving its way around the curved ceiling. Later, one of those men told me he finally understood Alexis’s book, which had been beyond his reach, given English is his second language.

After a year’s maternity leave, I returned to BWF in 2019 to deliver my second festival. We continued to program diverse voices, centering First Nations writing. We presented Angel’s Palace again and I commissioned a new work of “world building”. Prominent interior designer Anna Spiro agreed to create a room from the classic Queensland novel *Tirra Lirra by the River* by Jessica Anderson. This book was particularly relevant to the festival’s mainly female audience. It explores women’s precarious wellbeing in a patriarchal world and the importance of textiles in our survival, expression and sense of place.

This room was a popular catch-up spot for festival patrons. It was a testament to the power of literature to inspire art and remain relevant well after its publication date.

These two BWF immersive projects, which required trust, collaboration and imagination, attest to the astounding creative energy and talent to be found in Brisbane.

3A Letter Home Jackie French

I wore my Sunday dress with cherries on it to hear Dad speak at the Warana Writers Festival in 1963, though without the gloves and hat that nice ten-year-old girls wore on Sundays. Back then, even middle-class girls had only one “good” dress, unless they had older sisters to pass down more, or a Mum who could “run up” a quick skirt on the sewing machine. My mother had many talents, but sewing – and motherhood – were not among them.

Dad may have taken me to admire him, or to hear how a speech should be given. It was certainly not because I wanted to be a writer. My parents, most teachers, all guidance counsellors, boyfriends and a husband have informed me that no one could make a living as a writer in Australia. Put down the pen. Stop wasting time. But my heroes were Judith Wright and Kath Walker – later to be known to the public as Oodgeroo of the Noonuccal, or to us teenagers as “Auntie Kath”. Both were later to be mentors, one to become a close friend – and they had done it. I just kept writing.

There were trams down Queen Street then. The ice-cream man came on Sunday afternoons, with ice-cream in small cups or “family bricks” surviving the heat in canvas bags of dry ice. The girl who sat next to me in class was “Indian” because principals found some excuse to kick Indigenous kids out of schools, and the dunny men came Thursday afternoon, along with a thousand flies, to cart away the digested remnants of chops, sausages and three veg, extremely boiled. Abuse, corruption and alcoholic violence were common, but kept behind lace curtains or locked doors or in the darkness. (Do not speak of them, or you’ll suffer worse.)

I just kept writing.

If this was fiction, I’d have Dad realise I was a writer at the Brisbane Writers Festival, and in his last years he did see me speak there one night, then went out to celebrate with some grandkids and several bottles of red while I went to bed, for the next day’s school sessions. In reality, Dad had first watched me talk in Braidwood, on a platform with Judith Wright, who by then rarely spoke in public but agreed to that event as long as I could join her, a publishing novice with a couple of books and shortlistings.

“I’m sorry,” Dad said later, and he meant it. “You really are a writer.” He paused and added, “You probably always were.” Dad could be wise at times.

The first time I spoke at the Brisbane Writers Festival, three decades after that Warana night in the Brisbane Women’s Clubrooms, I signed books for an hour afterwards, then wended through the crowds to the loo, and sat and cried. I am not sure if they were tears of joy, or for the child I’d been.

I do know that standing on that writers’ platform, as the breeze from the river wound around my ankles, I knew that I’d come home.

Warana Writers Week, 1985–1990 Laurie Muller

Warana Writers Week emerged out of the Warana Writers Weekend in 1985 and ran to 1995, after which the chrysalis finally opened to become the Brisbane Writers Festival, in 1996. The warmth and generosity of spirit of the Australian writers during the first few Warana Writers Weeks was outstanding. Thea Astley, Tom Keneally, David Malouf, Jessica Anderson, Rodney Hall, Janette Turner Hospital, Helen Garner, Kate Grenville, Roger MacDonald, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Peter Carey, David Williamson, Tom Shapcott, Gerard Lee, Olga Masters, Elizabeth Jolley, Dimitris Tsaloumas, Hugh Lunn, Marion Halligan, Beverly Farmer, Mabel Edmund, Rosie Scott, Sue Gough, James Maloney, Liam Davidson, Herb Wharton, Melissa Lucashenko and many others added a lustre that Brisbane audiences responded to with enthusiasm.



4Holding Up a Thumb: An Essay about Perspective

Kris Kneen

I was sitting with writers Maxine Beneba Clarke and Melissa Lucashenko in the 2016 Brisbane Writers Festival Green Room in advance of their scheduled session. We were chatting about the controversy that I had missed at the opening-night address. Lionel Shriver, author of a book I greatly admired, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, had donned a sombrero in a big “fuck you” to what she called political correctness. She was clumsily trying to demonstrate the idea of “cultural appropriation” by putting on Mexican headwear to assert her claim that she could and would write from any perspective that she chose in a novel. She would steal cultural stories and write what she thought approximated other cultural perspectives with gay abandon and no one could stop her.

This was true. No one could stop her. As a writer, you are in charge of your own story. But the question remained: should people read it if she was presenting a pale imitation of another cultural perspective in her work and, more urgently, should the writers festival have paid her a significant fee to stomp her feet about something that really wasn’t true. No one was stopping her from writing what she wanted but, at the same time, no one could stop people from voicing their protest against the offence she was causing with her writing.

At that point in the conversation one of the volunteers came to take us to the venue. We stood and grabbed our bags and water bottles and headed to the door. On the way out we saw her – small, pale, blond. I felt Melissa – strong, tall, sure – stand straighter, surer. We were on Aboriginal land, Meanjin. And she knew what her ancestors would have done to someone who wanted to appropriate their stories.

She stood and pointed Lionel out to anyone who wanted to see her. “There she is,” Melissa said, still pointing. Everyone had heard about the opening-night antics. It was a performance that had tongues wagging. Was Shriver right? Was she being silenced when people took issue with her writing from a different cultural perspective? Were her individual rights being stripped away?

I had already had my say in the conversation on the balcony with Maxine and Melissa. I thought then, and I still think now, that Lionel does have a platform as a bestselling author. She is absolutely not being silenced. Her books are being published. She was being invited to deliver the opening address. Shriver could choose to use that platform in any way she liked. No one was stopping her from writing whatever she wanted to write, but at the same time no one was stopping us from choosing not to read what she chose to write if it was offensive to us, and no one was stopping someone from protesting if she did. Certainly no one was going to stop Melissa from raising her hand to point. No one could challenge the power of that gesture from a strong First Nations woman. Standing next to Melissa in that moment I had the privilege of glimpsing the world as she saw it, strengthened by an unbroken line of ancestors proud of their culture and protecting their land.

I loved Shriver’s book *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, and that was a story that benefitted from Lionel Shriver’s unique voice. I could almost see her skinny white thumb held up to measure the world on every page.

Perspective is important. BWF 2016 amplified this for many others who were participating in that conversation that year, but my own understanding of perspective did not begin there. As I stood in nervous solidarity that day, terrified by conflict but knowing that I needed to stand fast in my support of my friends, I brought my own perspective to the argument, one that had been sharpened and refined in my mind over many, many years. We all hold up our thumbs and squint to measure the world and our own thumbs are a part of each and every individual’s perspective.

I used to own a book called *Zoom* by Istvan Banyai. It is a picture book, and each time you turn the page the perspective changes. It starts with a jagged red shape, which, with a change of perspective, turns out to be the comb of a chicken. Step back again by turning the page and we see two children looking through a window at the chicken, which is standing on a fence. Another turn of the page and we are outside the front door of the house looking at the children, looking at the chicken. Another step back and we are jolted into a completely different understanding of what we are looking at. Here is an arm reaching down, huge as a giant’s, to grab hold of the house in which the children look at the chicken. Back we step, back and back, page by page and suddenly the house is a toy and a girl is playing with it. Back again and the girl is just a picture in a catalogue, not a real girl at all. We are on a cruise ship where a boy is holding the catalogue, but then the cruise ship is a picture on the side of a bus in a busy street and by now we are so far away from the chicken that we need to squint to remember it. The busy city street is on a TV that is being watched in the middle of a desert but the TV and the man watching it are on a postage stamp, and back and back it goes till we are looking at a planet, just a dot in the vast expanse of the dark universe.

I loved this book because of the rush of understanding when I first realised that the house that I had been watching was nothing but a toy – that shift in perspective forced me to let go of my assumptions. And then the satisfying end of the book, which took me back to my childhood, to when I used to lie on the grass, trying and failing to get my head around the size of the universe.

We move through the world looking, but not really seeing. This isn’t a failing on our part, it is a necessity. There is so much information bombarding our eyes, our ears, our nostrils, that to put together a true picture of the world would be too time consuming. Our bodies have invented a shorthand, an approximation of the world. It filters out things that are not essential for our survival, and gives our brains just enough information to keep us safe as we move through the world. Our brain is grabbing snatches of information and making wild leaps as to what is actually happening. We are literally inventing the world in our flexible brains.

When I was a young child there were things that seemed so normal that I didn’t even question them. My family were all artists and I had thought that every family lived with canvasses on easels in every room, the house smelling like linseed oil and turpentine, giant papier-mâché sculptures sprawling out across the lounge room. I didn’t think to question that our down time involved tearing up telephone books for one project or another, or mixing wood glue with water.

It wasn’t until I was in my twenties and met my partner that I realised some people actively discouraged pursuing a job in the arts. My partner was finishing his filmmaking course at uni when I met him and he casually said that now he would

have to get a “proper job”. In his family, a job in the arts had never been considered a “proper job”. I was stunned. What kind of job did he mean? Was there anything outside the creation of art? I had never had a “proper job” modelled for me. It was like I had turned the page on that book *Zoom* and the whole world shifted and opened, and I realised my family were far from normal. After that incident the pages kept turning and turning and, with Anthony in my life, I realised that my lens was narrow and focused on a different plane from those around me. I began to question every truism that I’d held dear. There were no certainties. Everything needed to be reassessed, over and over again.

While painting a landscape, an artist might hold their thumb or paintbrush up and squint. This is a tried-and-true method of measuring proportions, one thing against another, the artist’s body against the landscape, the landscape against a figure standing in the landscape. Your thumb can be divided, the size of things mapped out into the upper part or lower part of the digit. An artist’s body becomes the instrument of measure. The image is embodied in a thumb.

I chose to be a writer. I moved away from the world of visual arts that had been the context of my life until I was eighteen. I was moving into a new medium but I took the lessons of my childhood with me. I knew how to hold up a thumb to the world, to squint, to measure one thing against another and put them in their assigned place on the page.

My perspective in my writing was informed by the tradition of writers I was familiar with. Most of these writers were men. Most of them were English, although I had a fascination for Eastern and Central European authors because of my own Slovenian family background. I inhaled books by men as I had inhaled painting by male artists in my youth. I learned to write like a man.

I had never felt like a “real woman”. At the time I thought there was such a thing as “a real woman and a real man”. These gender roles were modelled for me in the books I read and the TV shows I watched, but not in my own house. At home, anything that distracted from the artistic process was looked at with suspicion. This included housework, which took up too much time that could otherwise be devoted to painting and sculpting. Similarly, a focus on clothing, makeup and hairstyles was a waste of money and time that could otherwise be devoted to my artistic growth.

The people I lived with were mostly women – my mother, grandmother, aunt, sister – and yet I was the only person in my house who delighted in wearing dresses. I loved dressing up and occasionally putting on makeup, but my role models in fashion were not exactly “real women”. I wanted to be pretty, like Dr Frankenfurter in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, or as fabulous as Divine. I was a singular female impersonator in a household of gender-neutral people. I wore my dresses as costume. Even in my twenties I would wear an evening gown or a cocktail dress to my day job, I’d wear glitter stuck to my mascara as I headed out to work wearing drag. My version of female impersonation had no place for the domestic. I was the femme fatale and every day was a dramatic adventure. I had no time for books about mothers, unless it was the kind of mother embodied by Bette Davis in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane*, a mother who was squirming against the role, a mother with agency, with anger, with bared teeth.

I was searching for myself in the art I consumed. We all are in our formative years. We all want to find the lens that matches our understanding of the world. I was drawn to books and films about women who did not fit the feminine. Bad mothers, women

who found pleasure in their own sexuality, women who rejected their assigned gender roles. Interestingly, books by Eastern and Central European writers often featured these kinds of women and I often wondered if it was cultural. These women had agency and were not to be defined by their children, their husbands, their menial jobs.

Through my reading I was polishing a lens of my own through which to describe the world. Sometimes I would recommend a book or become obsessed by a particular art film and rave about it to my university friends. Most of them would look at me strangely. What could I possibly see in the work of Cronenberg, or the movie *A Zed & Two Noughts* by Peter Greenaway? Why was I reading *Coin Locker Babies* by Ryū Murakami or *Crash* by J.G. Ballard? These works were, quite frankly, disgusting. They were unfamiliar and jarring to my new university friends. My lens did not match that of my friends. When they recommended domestic dramas, I was numbed into despair by the descriptions of details like washing dishes or manipulating a spouse, which had never been a part of my own experience. I had to learn that the world existed outside the singular experience of my own consciousness. I had to, empathically, change the lens.

These days I can enjoy domestic dramas. I have learned the kind of empathic reading that allows me to put myself in the shoes of others unlike myself. I have seen the lives of others and I realise that my own childhood was wildly different from theirs and, although I am still attracted to outsider stories, where the protagonist feels separated from the mainstream by their experience of the world, I can also read insider stories and appreciate experiences outside of my own.

I am sure there are still blind spots and biases that I am not even aware I am clinging to. We are all in some ways opaque to ourselves. I know I have a chip on my shoulder about wealth and class. But no one can be held responsible for the circumstances of their birth; it is what you do with that privilege that counts, and privilege is relative anyway. I have been practising the art of not jumping to immediate conclusions about characters and stories. I have been taking time to see things through other eyes, going back to my childhood training, holding my thumb up and measuring other perspectives against my own.

Until 2017 my own thumb was a good measure. I thought about how women, men, trans and non-binary folk might see the world in different ways. I knew how to hold up a feminist lens and read a book differently when focusing on gendered relationships. I thought about how sexual preference changed the meaning of a text, how so many books assume heterosexuality as the default setting and how leaving yourself open to homosexual and bisexual readings of a work can completely transform it. I thought about how ethnic and cultural backgrounds can lead a person to different readings and, although I would never be able to see things through a cultural background different from my own, I would try to learn as much about cultural norms of different ethnicities to bring a more nuanced understanding to a text.

I read a lot of books by non-western writers, and not just my beloved Eastern and Central Europeans. I read Chinese authors, Japanese, Korean; I read African authors, First Nations people from Australia and from Canada and from the Americas. These readings brought a richness to my understanding of the world. Things like ghosts and dead relatives take on new meaning when seen through different cultural lenses. Myths become richer and more impactful. Reading from different cultural perspectives is like turning the pages of *Zoom*, suddenly the world shifts wildly under your feet and

for a moment you are unmoored before you read more and begin to see the rules that govern those different perspectives and realise they are different from our own.

Perhaps it has been the very act of reading books by First Nations people that has radically transformed my view of the world in recent years. Or perhaps it was my deep dive into the weird world of quantum physics, researching for a particular novel. Maybe this shift has also been informed by my research into the microbiome, yet another deep dive for a work in progress. Whatever caused it, something has happened to my perspective recently. It has been knocked completely off kilter. I have become suspicious of my own thumb.

These days I can't read a novel or watch a movie without knowing that the lens we are looking through is unflinchingly, maddeningly human. We hold up a human thumb for measure, but a human-centric perspective is a very dangerous thing.

There is a short story by Ursula Le Guin called "The Author of the Acacia Seeds and Other Extracts from the Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics" and reading it was a part of this sudden seismic shift in my perspective. The story consists of three segments, each dealing with linguistics. Our human idea of language is all about words. But perhaps ants speak using chemical markers, maybe plants use temperature. And how do rocks speak over millennia? Our human concept of story cannot at this stage even begin to encompass the stories that play out over eons, the words of stones that might take a decade to form.

After reading this story by Le Guin I began to read books by First Nations Americans and Canadians. These writers, like First Nations writers in Australia, had a completely different relationship to animals and plants and landscape. If anyone wants to go down the rabbit hole with me I can highly recommend books by Robin Wall Kimmerer – especially *Braiding Sweetgrass* – which eases a reader into a more inclusive understanding of the symbiotic relationship between plants and people. And, of course, the wonderful eye-opening perspectives of Brisbane-based Ellen van Neerven has added their take to an ever-expanding view of the world.

The page had been turned. The veil of my human-centric bias had been torn. The beginning of a new understanding of the world had begun for me. I put my thumb down and now try to find a different, non-human measure, perhaps the spread of mycelium under the surface of the soil, or the creep of the rising tides.

How can we understand the world from a perspective other than our human one? It came as a surprise to find that many people have been trying to do this for many decades. Italo Calvino has playfully explored the universe from different perspectives in *Cosmicomics*. Ted Chiang has done it with an exploration of alien languages in *Stories of Your Life and Others*. Donna Haraway has been looking at interspecies existence and even cyborgs for decades. Kurt Vonnegut was getting his head around time in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and my beloved J.G. Ballard was well worth revisiting because all of my new obsessions with perspectives were there in each of his books, people becoming plants, people becoming crystal, people becoming machine. I had been so locked in to my human biases that I had almost missed what I had already been reading.

Last year I almost wept when I read *The Animals in That Country* and discovered that Laura Jean McKay had so poetically incorporated the idea of animal knowledge into her book. When her protagonist, a dingo called Sue, talked about rain, she called it "dead sky meat". It took me an hour to turn that phrase around in my head. My

brain was humming with it. Animals see the world differently, microorganisms see the world differently, mycelium sees the world differently, plants, rocks, dirt, all these different perspectives we are ignoring, all these perspectives that could help us to stop destroying the planet, which, through our human perspective, appears simply as a resource for sustaining human life. I have turned the page. I have zoomed out to a view that is surprisingly different from the one I thought was universal.

I have not reached the last page of my own personal *Zoom* manifesto. I know that this page I have just turned is still creeping slowly into focus. I still don't understand the implications of what I am beginning to see. I still don't know how to clearly articulate it to others. But I know it is important that it comes into focus before it is too late to save what we are destroying. The planet is finite and we are too far down the path of mining it for our own wealth.

Sometimes I want to be the person who turns the page for others, the writer whose work cracks open the mysteries of the world through a new perspective. I want to be one of the new guard of writers who save the planet by handing readers a new lens through which to save the world. But this is my ego talking. One writer bringing their lens up to the eyes of a reader will not be enough to illuminate the kaleidoscope of ideas that make up our world.

I am at such an early stage in my journey, I am still climbing out of the swamp. Surely, I haven't understood this new idea that is still coalescing in my head. I am hungry for the stories that will help me to see more clearly. I am hungry for ideas that will challenge and change the way I see. I devour the stories from First Nations writers, ecologists, environmentalists, science-fiction writers, poets. These are the visionaries who might just have the answer to the changes we need to make. I step up to the page, holding hands with them, holding hands with the animals, insects, microbial life, plants, rocks, mushrooms. We all need to be standing together for this. Together we can sing a note so pure that it could shatter the lens that blinds us. Together we are polishing new glass. When we hold our human and non-human thumbs up to the horizon, when a reader leans in, peers at the new and startlingly strange view through this collectively adjusted lens, the world will suddenly lurch into focus. Then, and only then can we begin to make the changes that we all so desperately need.



5A Certain Connection

Samuel Wagan Watson

Prologue: Circa, October 1823

After a week of horrendous weather Surveyor-General John Oxley has journeyed up an uncharted river that he has considered naming “Brisbane”. Members of his crew are less than enthusiastic ...

First Mate: [Whispering to Cabin Boy] 'Ere Oxley goes again ... Apparently we're here to find a site for a new penal colony.
Cabin Boy: Don' know 'bout that Gov. That southern bank would be a nice spot for a literary festival ...
First Mate: You rubber-head. You can't even read! What you gonna do at a literary festival?
Cabin Boy: I take offence to *rubber-head* ... I'll have you know, Gov, the maritime union says I have enough qualifications to be impaired!

Meanwhile, a pair of Jagera hunters are observing the boatload of interlopers.

Hunter #1: These fellas look a bit weird. [Then reverting his speech to pig-latin] Un- say, azy-cray!
Hunter #2: Sh*t! There goes our yarnin' circles!

We need to cherish such a spot, where our current writers festival is staged. Even a satellite event hosted outside of the precinct seems to provide our wordsmiths and performers with a venue that allows optimum audience satisfaction! The technicians are a great bunch to operate with.

Festival crew have a creative and comfortable environment to work in. The army of volunteers are SO friendly and striving that we need to commend them at every opportunity.

In 2004 I was given the opportunity to facilitate part of the festival program under the nurturing management of Rosemary Cameron. I have nothing but respect for her; most festival directors *could've, should've, would've* smashed me over the head and sold my organs to a donor bank! You can take the artsworkeer out of the writer, but on my part I remained a bumbling pest of a writer tangled with my role as artsworkeer!

To cut to the chase, Rosemary secured me an incredible budget to showcase a selection of the most sought-after Indigenous writers and artists that could be lured to Brisbane, with extra finance to invite several speakers from overseas.

We had a guest from an isolated region of southern Mexico. The week before the festival started his interpreter was needed at home because of illness in the family. Luckily our writer kept a cool head and we decided to move forward with the events equipped with some long-winded explanations about his passages. To say the least, how can you do justice to a poet's words and passion when only a percentage of the message is delivered to the audience? To our absolute amazement, an individual in attendance read the program and was fluent in the dialect of the writer and jumped at the opportunity to join the panel. *Instances like this simply do not rectify themselves!*

If I learned anything from Rosemary it was that creative industries can't offer anyone a correct insight for Literary Festival Management 101; just be prepared to hit the ground running ...

I've come clean and admitted how terrible my management skills were but there was a children's event that was simply outstanding on the Saturday morning. For eons my honourable ancestors gathered on Kurilpa Point. A tribal entourage or a hunting party, family and individuals gathered, rallied to make the crossings onto the northern reaches of Country. This is where protocols and lore were renewed and exchanged. Certain connections brokered.

My brother had completed a deployment in the Middle East. Not only had he returned safely but he was bristling with creativity! On Maiwar Green that morning the weather and elements helped provide a stunning glow to the smiles of at least one hundred kids and carers as they *get down* to my brother's Technics decks and mixing desk! Koori DJ, Wire MC, had everyone beat-boxing to the funk and pump! I can recall our festival chair Sallyanne Atkinson and director Rosemary Cameron demonstrating some of their own classy dance grooves among the youth. The scene was reactive - *reconciliation* in action - in a cool setting of special connections ...



6BWF Volunteers: Enthusiasm and Kindness

Meg Vann

Working as BWF Volunteers Manager for nearly ten years has been a joy and a privilege. Books have always created a place of safety and connection for me. It's part of my life's mission to support the reading and writing community so it can provide that safety and connection and expansion for other people as well.

The volunteers achieve the festival – without the volunteers, there is no Brisbane Writers Festival. They actually deliver the festival: they greet the people attending, they care for the artists and make sure they get to their sessions on time and in the right place, they set up the stage, they do everything so that the festival rolls out smoothly. Many of the artists over the years have pulled me aside and said, “I just need to let you know that the BWF volunteers are the best I have seen. The way that they run this festival is just incredible.”

The volunteers have a strong sense of ownership of the festival and gain a really deep and meaningful level of satisfaction and pride in being a volunteer with BWF, which is wonderful. On a practical level, I give great references to volunteers who work with me and impress me. A lot of us bookish nerds can feel quite isolated, and we're not really brave enough to introduce ourselves to people just by attending the festival. By volunteering at the festival, I put people in teams, introduce them to each other and build a culture where they support each other, and friendships form through that, which is really lovely. I'm yet to hear of a “meet cute” happening at BWF but I know that they're out there!

I have a strong inclusion program for BWF volunteers, so we recruit far and wide, and provide training and resources on things like cultural competence and invisible disability as well as on the volunteer roles themselves. We get a lot of book club members who have the time and resources to devote to the important work of delivering the festival each year. We have a lot of students from all the major universities, TAFE, overseas students, schools from all around south-east Queensland and northern New South Wales.

We also work with people from vulnerable and targeted populations – so many of our events happen at the State Library, and there is a high population of people who are intermittently sleeping outdoors around Kurilpa. We've had some wonderful experiences of people from that community or in that situation becoming involved as volunteers. We also have people who are living with mental illness or other challenges in their life and, as they volunteer, they become more confident as a part of that festival community. We've had people disclose some of the incredible hardships that they are courageously facing, and they use the festival as a marker in their year of something challenging but positive, and they communicate their needs really well so that I can find a role that suits them.

Our First Nations Australian and other First Nations volunteers are a vital part of the volunteer team, bringing cultural knowledge and building cultural safety – the festival as a whole still has much to learn, but works to centre First Nations authors and creators.

Another big part of that impact is the international students who volunteer at the festival and the wonderful cultural diversity and linguistic diversity that they bring. We get these incredible students from China, India and PNG who extend the cultural reach of reading and writing in Australia, which has been predominantly a white, colonial concern.

Publishing has been very much a process of the privileged, and it's such an important right and privilege for every single one of us to see ourselves reflected in Australian stories. It's beautiful to see the volunteer team bring that to the festival and extend the culture, reach and impact of the festival that way. It speaks to the depth of reading, writing and stories, and the arts. We have such a strong cultural impact, we have a demonstrable economic impact, and then we have a personal impact on the ability of people to live their lives well. It's great to hear that feedback about how BWF can be a joyful, kind experience for them to gently engage with society and with themselves in a positive way.

There's just a real kindness that sits at the heart of the volunteer team – enthusiasm and kindness.

The BWF volunteers have felt like a family for many years before and will go on after me, but certainly I have joined that family with so much pride and passion for what we are all doing together. All these faces are flicking through my mind of all the incredible volunteers who have been with us for years and years and have such a deep knowledge of the festival and what it's done. And all the new faces that absolutely shine with enthusiasm and wonder, all those people coming together and settling into those roles and finding their feet each year, because the festival is different each year, it changes and grows and is a living thing.

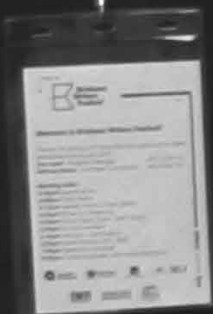
I think my deepest point of pride comes from that we all – with all our diversity, strengths and challenges – we all come together for that week each year to really create a living cultural event celebrating books, reading and stories. To be a part of that and to see a vibrant community with such energy each year, with the artists and not just with the patrons, but also with those volunteers who sit at the heart of the festival, it's a real privilege to be involved in that. The volunteers are so lovely, even when they're really stressed out about something that's happening in their life and that's impacting on their ability to communicate clearly at the festival – with a bit of active listening, kindness and solution-focused responses, it's just incredible. It's a great microcosm of how a lot of us would like broader society to function.

I want to give a shoutout to some of our volunteers, but I don't want to miss out any names, so to our long-serving volunteers – you know who you are – thank you. Thank you for the backbone that you have given to this festival over the years and the decades. To our up-and-coming volunteers who have been with us a few years now, you are going to become the next senior level of volunteers who keep this festival running into the future. For the wonderful new people who will join us this year and every year after that, whether you come once or whether you return, your enthusiasm and wonder is always so welcome and such an important part of the festival.



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Celine Condorelli, with Pi
Corps & Corps, 2017
Celine Condorelli, with Pi
Corps & Corps, 2017



VOLUNTEER



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7 Authors Make Their Own

Alex Adsett

Along with the joy of stories, being an insider to an industry that makes the stories is one of the most fun parts of working in publishing. And nothing says “insider” like finding out – by whispered word of mouth – the door number of the secret room in the festival hub hotel where the parties happen! Those secret author-party rooms were only around for a couple of Brisbane Writers Festivals but became legend – a shadowy suite of cold drinks and deep-fried nibbles for authors to snack on late into the evening. And for me as a then-emerging literary agent, there was the sheer glee of opening a door in an otherwise nondescript hotel corridor, into a room of BWF literati – some already friends, and some to just idolise quietly from afar.

Parties aside, as a career book person, I am inordinately proud of BWF as my hometown book festival, and love the moments I’ve been part of over the years. I chaired my first author panel at BWF way back in 2010, with my beloved grandma, herself a staunch supporter of Queensland arts and BWF, seated in the front row to watch the *disaster* that first panel was. Having the person who was instrumental in nurturing my love of books there to cheer me on in my bookish career is a cherished memory, and one I will always associate with our wonderful writers festival. Not that I’ve ever again needed it, but Grandma afterwards gave me a bell to ring, in case any more authors decided to dominate the panel and not stop talking.

BWF has always been a chance for the publishing industry to congregate and celebrate our amazing community of authors. From book launches, late night soirees on the green, the pop-up pineapple bar and Angel’s Palace, BWF has brought that community together (despite the freak spring storms, when the festival was held in September, that sometimes rolled through, scattering us all for cover). One year we had a strange desultory lead-up to the festival. The national mood was grim and no one had high hopes for book sales that year, and yet, when the authors gathered, the mood lifted, conversation flowed and suddenly we were back on track. With intense conversations fizzing madly around us, legendary Brisbane author Krissy Kneen leaned over to say, “When authors come together, they make their own atmosphere.”

Year after year, that atmosphere of conversation, community, ideas and inspiration is what the Brisbane Writers Festival captures and brings together. Happy anniversary BWF, and here’s to many more!

8 The Wound Is the Entry Point

Bec Mac

I have been fortunate to have moderated many brilliant panels at the Brisbane Writers Festival from 2017 to 2021. I love the festival as it’s one of those rare opportunities to discuss ideas that can revolutionise the world, hear stories that transform our sense of self and place and, while we are at it, explore deep human experiences and the moral ambiguities in life and humanity. It’s also a chance to meet some truly fabulous people committed to their craft.

One discussion has stuck with me from a panel in 2017 with Anosh Irani, Krissy Kneen and Deborah Dobson: when it comes to understanding and writing about someone’s “interior life” the *wound* is the entry point.

Anosh elaborated after this panel in one of my POPSART interviews in reference to his book *The Parcel* about a retired trans-gendered sex worker who is required to look after and train a “parcel” to become a sex worker. He said, “To enter someone’s interior world one cannot write out of fascination, one has to write out of compulsion and you really need to understand the human beings’ wound, what is it that is really hurting this person, what is the point of really deep pain within this human being ... once you truly understand it, as it takes a long time, you have found the entry into that person’s interior life.”

The concept of the wound as an entry point is also relevant in contemplating Nigel Brennan’s memoir, *The Price of Life*, and local legend Andrew Stafford’s *Something to Believe In*. Both these authors had delved deep into their own wounds, one of being held hostage and tortured in a foreign country, the other of mental health and suicide ideation. As a moderator, being able to openly discuss such very profound stories with these authors and survivors was an incredible honour.

But in the shade and the light of the BWF, there have also been many hilarious moments. In talking to the wonderful Kevin Kwan just before his film *Crazy Rich Asians* hit the cinemas, we experienced the astonishing real-life stories that fed his novel – a friend’s living room that included a pond filled with baby sharks, people with nannies for their Saint Bernard dogs and tropical fish collectors sending their \$200,000 dragon fish to a plastic surgeon to get that “perfect” look.

BWF has also been a visual feast! Angel’s Palace, designed by contemporary Indigenous artist Gordon Hookey and inspired by Alexis Wright’s critically acclaimed novel *Carpentaria* and the bespoke hub Nora’s Corner, created by Anna Spiro and inspired by Jessica Anderson’s *Tirra Lirra by the River*, have been memorable.

Warana Writers Week, 1990

Laurie Muller

In 1990, A Little Tirra Lirra by the River was one of the sessions that resonated strongly with the good folk of Brisbane. A shy, eloquent Jessica Anderson making her first and only appearance at Warana Writers Week and a warm, welcoming David Malouf shared their memories of their home city. It was as if we were eavesdropping on a private, intimate chat between two old friends. Both Miles Franklin Award winners, their way with words, their prescience, gentle humour and mutual respect for each other was memorable and greatly appreciated by the full-house audience.

9 Tall Tales and True

Phil Brown

The mission – should I choose accept it – was simple. Pick up American author Lionel Shriver from the airport. It was the sometimes-controversial American writer's first Brisbane Writers Festival appearance and I was dispatched to make sure she got to her hotel.

After meeting her we headed downtown. I made superficial conversation. And that's where regret now sets in. There is so much I could have asked her but didn't. If I was sent to pick her up now I would take the long way back because there would be rather a lot of ground to cover.

That was a missed opportunity. I like Shriver and I know she can be a bit edgy but we got along fine. Besides, I had a job to do and that was simply to serve as her driver. That was fun and if I cast my mind back over several decades of festival experience for some reason that memory stands out.

My BWF experiences date back to the days of Warana Writers Week, the festival's beginnings. I remember attending a session that involved Michael Wilding, who was the epitome of literary coolness to me back then when I was a young, deranged poet just starting to be published.

That event would eventually become BWF, one of the most important cultural events on the calendar in the Queensland capital. I've been lucky enough to be involved since its inception, as a writer and as a journalist and host. I've met some amazing people along the way (Philip Noyce, Alexander McCall Smith, Shriver ... the list goes on) and been part of some amazing sessions, and I did serve for some time on the board and was even festival chair for a while, although, to be brutally honest, being a chair doesn't suit my temperament.

I'm more of a footstool.

BWF has been part of my working and creative life for as long as I can remember. I have done sessions with some amazing writers and celebrities, and have been lucky enough to spruik my own books at the festival. My favourite part of the festival? Okay this might sound superficial but it's the Green Room. This is where writers and publishers and publicists mingle and enjoy cut sandwiches and free coffee. That's not to be underestimated.

Here there's an intellectual intermingling that cannot be replicated anywhere else and, when I am hosting or appearing, I always endeavour to be early so I can soak up the atmosphere in the Green Room. I feel fortunate to have been so intimately involved and to have so many memories, even if some of them may have been imagined.

I have a favourite festival story. I can't tell you if it did actually happen but I heard it happened and I choose to believe that. It involved veteran poet Robert Adamson, who arrived for the festival to find his hotel room wasn't ready.

He had to get changed for his session though and, a tad annoyed that he couldn't get into his room, he decided to disrobe and get changed right there in his hotel foyer.

Did it really happen? I will have to ask him some day. I hope it did.

10 Hold the Pewsey Vale

Craig Munro

I first attended the Brisbane Writers Festival, under a different guise of course, when I was developing a fiction list at the University of Queensland Press in the early 1970s. Within a couple of years I commissioned Peter Carey's first book, the short-story collection *Fat Man in History*, and then edited David Malouf's debut novel *Johnno*.

At that time the biennial Adelaide Writers Week was Australia's premier literary festival, not least because its program featured high-profile authors from around the world. The first of my many visits to Writers Week was in March 1976 and it was an unforgettable experience. After making a last-minute decision to go, I hastily booked flights, only to discover every hotel was fully booked. Writers Week is part of the much bigger Adelaide Festival of the Arts, and culture vultures from around the globe descend on the city every two years.

Hearing about my accommodation dilemma, fellow UQP editor Roger McDonald came to the rescue, putting me in touch with a writer friend who lived within walking distance of the festival. On arrival, however, I discovered that every room of his little stone cottage was infested with poets. There were so many that Les Murray was sharing a shed in the backyard with another poet from Sydney. It was a typically hot March in Adelaide and in such close quarters tensions were bound to emerge. After the first night, Les's roommate announced that he couldn't stand the "belching and farting" any longer and was returning to Sydney.

Literary celebrities James Baldwin, Erica Jong and Kurt Vonnegut were among those from overseas who'd agreed to speak at the festival but dropped out before it began. Others did manage to turn up, including Maori poet Hone Tuwhare, British poet Ted Hughes, Russian poet Bella Akhmadulina, American playwright Tennessee Williams and Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka – still a very impressive international line-up.

The following year I spoke at the Warana Writers Weekend, which was part of the 1977 Queensland Festival of the Arts. Writers sessions were held at the Queensland Institute of Technology (now QUT), adjacent to Parliament House. I was on a Saturday-morning panel with publishers Pat Woolley (of Wild & Woolley), Colin Talbot (Outback Press) and Walter Stone (Wentworth Press). Pat's publishing partner Michael Wilding (one of my UQP authors) spoke in the next session – which Pat chaired – and Michael then led an afternoon panel titled "The State of Australian Writing and Publishing Today".

When Peter Carey was invited to speak at a special *Fat Man in History* event at the 1978 Brisbane festival, we arranged to have lunch beforehand at the University Staff Club. I shared his aversion to public speaking, and was pretty sure he'd be anxious about his debut festival performance, so ordered a bottle of the club's popular Pewsey Vale riesling. As an advertising executive, Peter had to make campaign presentations to the boards of large corporations; he told me he ranked such traumatic occasions as "one Valium", "two Valium" or "three Valium" events. In the absence of such fortification, I got us another bottle of the reliable Pewsey Vale. As the afternoon wore on, we siphoned this off – sitting on the club verandah overlooking the university lake.



In the gathering gloom we took a cab into the city and I dropped him off at the Botanic Gardens, where a writers festival marquee had been set up. By a stroke of bad timing, I was travelling interstate and had to miss his performance. From all accounts, including Peter's, it was memorable, and the Friday night crowd was well primed and boisterous. Midway through, he was interrupted by a thunderstorm crashing around the marquee. Given the general weirdness of his fiction, it seemed fitting that his first festival gig had been punctuated by bolts of lightning and the high-pitched screeching of fruit bats feasting on the nearby Moreton Bay fig trees.

The Warana Writers Weekend, Warana Writers Week and Brisbane Writers Festival blossomed during the 1980s and 1990s, attracting many high-profile writers as well as an increasing number of publishers, publicists and literary agents. They came to support and promote their authors and to scout for new talent. With the development of a more vibrant literary culture in Queensland, BWF proved to be a happy hunting ground for editors and agents from Sydney and Melbourne.

The University of Queensland Press had by then become one of the country's leading publishers of new fiction and poetry, and in 1998 I edited *The Writer's Press* to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of UQP. In 2006 Robyn Sheahan-Bright and I co-edited *Paper Empires*, a history of book publishing in Australia from 1946 to 2005.

My own publishing memoir, *Under Cover: Adventures in the Art of Editing*, was released in 2015 and I was invited to speak at the Brisbane Writers Festival once again. This time, however, it was a novelty to take part as an author rather than as an editor. *Under Cover* had been published in Melbourne by Scribe so I spoke first at the Melbourne Writers Festival before flying to Brisbane, where my book was launched at Avid Reader bookshop by longtime UQP author and old friend Hugh Lunn.

A few days later I conducted an editing masterclass at the festival and chaired a lively session on translation that featured Icelandic writer Sjón, Indonesian novelist and translator Maggie Tiojakin and New York publisher Jonathan Galassi, who is also a writer and translator. I'd been on a panel with Jonathan a few days before at the Melbourne Writers Festival, where his debut novel *Muse* – about a book editor – was released in Australia by Text to coincide with his appearance at the festival.

We hit it off immediately – I'd read *Muse*, he'd read *Under Cover*, and we shared a love of publishing gossip. After the BWF session on translation we lunched together at the Stokehouse Restaurant at South Bank. The following month I caught up with him again, this time at the Manhattan headquarters of literary imprint Farrar, Straus and Giroux, where he was publishing director. He'd paid for our lunch in Brisbane – I returned the favour in New York.

Since moving to Sydney in 2011, I've become a regular at its writers festival – held for many years at Wharf 4 beside Sydney Harbour, and now at the Redfern Carriageworks. During the Covid ban on international travel, expatriate novelist Peter Carey was beamed in via Zoom from his New York apartment. After winning an improbable four Miles Franklin Awards as well as two Booker Prizes, Peter is now a literary superstar and he entertained a packed audience in the cavernous Carriageworks theatre.

White-haired, affable and still with his trademark sharp wit, he looked perfectly at ease in his small study, with a wall of shelves behind him displaying copies of his books. It was 9pm in Manhattan and I couldn't help wondering if he'd been enjoying an after-dinner drink with his wife, the publisher and literary agent Frances Coady, in preparation for this festival gig on the other side of the world.

11 Young Once Nick Earls

It was in the car on the way to the festival that I started having doubts. Doubts about what I was planning to say on the panel. Doubts about the school uniform I was wearing. I was a twenty-eight-year-old senior medical officer for a health insurer at the time.

My first book had just come out, and Warana Writers Week 1992 would be my festival debut as a published author. I'd worked years for this. It was a big deal. For me, the history of human existence would now fall into two distinct periods: the time before I became a published author and the time after. And, just as the former was characterised by struggle and rejection, so would the latter be by accolades, plenty and an entirely justifiable sense of my own importance.

Three years before, I had jointly won the Shell Warana Young Performers Award, mostly for writing song lyrics. The nature of that award meant I had to perform, so they threw me at an unsuspecting Writers Week. I did everything I could to impress, and Laurie Muller, head of UQP and chair of Writers Week, suggested afterwards that I should start with a collection of short stories. In mid-1992, that collection, *Passion*, was about to become a reality.

When Writers Week invited me back, I said yes, assuming something very different from my wannabe days of 1989. Assuming that my slim volume of prose was my ticket to being programmed with David Malouf, Peter Carey and assorted Booker Prize winners. We'd be in the special green room for *published* authors that I'd never seen, they would see me as one of their own and we'd talk special published-author talk. Which I imagined involved quoting Rabelais and Swift, gossiping about Patrick White and complaining about how the people who adapted our books into movies really didn't understand them.

It turned out the festival wanted me for a panel called The Young Ones. I pictured myself with a nineteen-year-old who had written several gig reviews for a student newspaper and a nineteen-year-old who was writing some poems at uni. And they were putting us on first on the Saturday morning. The big stars wouldn't have rolled out of bed by then, or, if they had, they'd have got no further than the sumptuous breakfast buffet in the published-authors' hotel. Our audience would be the parents of the nineteen-year-olds, that guy Ted who always came to the free stuff and asked unusual questions, and approximately 395 empty seats.

"But I'll have had a book published by then, dammit!" I think I screamed at the letter when it arrived. "By the people who published *Johnno!* And *Oscar and Lucinda!* And *my book!* Which is about to go out and amaze people and make me very special! Because this is not 1989 and I have now *made it!*"

I maintained the rage. I demonstrated my maturity by crafting a sarcastic panel piece about the audacity and rank injustice of the festival programming me as one of the "Young Ones" when by then I would have been a *published author* for several weeks. In the unlikely event that it was too subtle for some, I decided to turn up to the panel in my school uniform. That'd teach them.

By the morning of the panel, my confidence in this plan was slipping. Not even the brightly polished prefect's badge on the lapel was enough to reassure me.

I needed a boost. Something to tell me all would be okay.

My editor had told me that *Passion* was to be reviewed in *The Australian* that Saturday, and I decided that would do it. Nothing boosts the confidence like a glowing, or at least supportive, review in the national broadsheet.

So, halfway to the festival, I pulled in at a servo, telling myself all would be well. The review would put things back on track. I would read the words "Nick Earls is an outstanding new star in Australian fiction"; I would exhale and I would surge into the festival in triumph, Malouf and Carey at the door, compelled to meet this hot, hot young writer they'd read about at the hotel breakfast buffet.

I opened the paper as soon as I was back in the car. I pulled out the "Review" liftout and flicked through to the books section. And there was the cover of *Passion*. And the words: "Nick Earls is an outstanding new star in Australian fiction." But ...

But the whole sentence read "Nick Earls's publishers' claim that he is an outstanding new star in Australian fiction is to be flatly contradicted." And then, in case there was any doubt, "Often do we say that too many books are published. Rarely are we prepared to name the books. *Passion* would be on my list."

I would not surge into the festival that day, through an impromptu author guard of honour or otherwise. I wanted to surge home, or into a witness protection program, or at least out of the school uniform, but it wasn't an option.

I drove on, telling myself it could be worse and desperately trying to find evidence to back that up. It was 10am, the first panel of the day. No one would be there. That's what I settled on. And no one would have read *The Australian* yet. I'd do my sarcastic piece to a near-empty room oblivious to the review, and slink home with a festival appearance on my CV. Not quite the dream I'd been hoping to live that day, but by now the best conceivable outcome.

I got close to the festival. No parks. What was on in this part of town on a Saturday morning that meant there were so many parked cars? I drove around and around, parked miles away and had to jog to get there close to time.

What was on? Warana Writers Week was on.

As I got closer, I could see where all the former occupants of the cars were. Waiting in their hundreds outside my panel venue.

As I pushed my way to the door, scoring one second glance after another at my school uniform and a whole lot of murmuring in my wake, all I could tell myself was at least they wouldn't have read *The Australian*. Not the books bit anyway. At worst, they'd have flicked through the front section at home, then left the rest until after their festival visit.

As the festival volunteers opened the door to let me in, I saw a huge sponsor's banner being hung on the opposite wall. And the sponsor for that session was *The Australian*. And they were promoting their sponsorship by placing a free copy of the paper on every seat.

So I took my place on stage and watched as the audience came in, took their seats, got excited about their free paper and, because they were at the writers festival, I'd swear every one of them went straight to the books pages. And noticed the cover of *Passion*. And every one of them looked up at me, beaming, wanting to share the young author's thrill of a first book being reviewed.

And then they read the review.

I did my first festival panel session as a published author to a packed room of people, all of whom felt so embarrassed for me that they had to stare out the window and pretend there was something fascinating going on out there, just to avoid making eye contact.

Passion was remaindered by 1994.

It ended up being the festival that helped lift me out of the hole that I'd fallen in. In 1995, I was back, and programmed to read at the young writers night-time event, this time leaving the school uniform in the wardrobe. That reading caught a publisher's attention and saw her asking for my manuscript.

The year after that, Warana Writers Week became the Brisbane Writers Festival for the first time, and that publisher released my novel to coincide with it, with the festival throwing a launch party in the old fire station carpark at Red Hill, a short walk from the street that gave the book its name.

12Ah, the Memories Robyn Sheahan-Bright

Memories of Warana Writers Week begin for me with attending the annual children's writing day included in its program, in the late 1980s. It's difficult to remember now, in an environment saturated with author tours and festivals, that writers' events weren't nearly as common at that time, so it was hugely exciting to hear luminaries speaking about their work. Laurie Muller, general manager of University of Queensland Press, was a driving force in those early years, as chair of the festival's committee, and instigated many other literary events as well. I had no idea then, though, that I would later become vice-chair of the newly named Brisbane Writers Festival in 1996-97 under the expert stewardship of then chair, Dr Adam Shoemaker. (The Brisbane Festival was established in 1996 and the former Warana Writers Week became part of it.) Prior to that I served as a Warana committee member (1991-95) in my role as executive director of the Queensland Writers Centre. Acclaimed writer Sue Gough, leading academic and poet Professor Philip Neilsen and distinguished former Jacaranda Wiley publisher John Collins chaired significant and eclectic programs in those years and John held the festival at our magnificent Customs House for one year before returning to South Bank and the Cultural Centre venues. We initially had a large number of people on the organising committee representing a wide range of other members of the Queensland writing community, including distinguished local academics, booksellers, University of Queensland Press, Playlab, poetry groups, and the Fellowship of Australian Writers (Qld). (Later, as a board, this range was necessarily reduced to include a smaller, more strategic group of members.)

Personal highlights of those years included the moving Minjerribah Tribute on Stradbroke Island in 1993, when we all travelled by bus and barge and spent the day picnicking and listening to First Nations writers paying tribute to the late, great Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Assisting in the organisation of a launch that same year of Lionel Fogarty's *Booyooburra* (Hyland House, 1993) with electric performances by the Wakka Wakka Dance Company was also memorable. Three years later, in 1996, an event was held at a fashionable new venue, Grand Orbit, to launch *Paradise to Paranoia* (UQP, 1995) a collection of Queensland writing I co-edited with Nigel Krauth. Venero Armano chaired, and readers included Andrew McGahan, Nick Earls and Robbie Lappan. Stephen Cummings was a BWF guest that year and graciously agreed to sing on what proved to be a very poor sound system; it was a somewhat chaotic and yet unforgettable evening. The launch of Nick Earls' *Zigzag Street* (Anchor, 1996) at the Red Hill Fire Station, complete with live music, a bar and dozens of excited locals sharing the excitement of a novel actually celebrating their suburb and city was another of that year's high points. Throughout these years, seeing expatriate writers such as Janette Turner Hospital, Peter Carey and David Malouf return home to share reflections on their careers with their readers at several events, to inspire a new generation of Queensland writers, was salutary. And, finally, witnessing the number of publishers and agents whose attention was turning to Queensland as a source of new writing talent was one of the very satisfying aspects of working on the festival.



During Adam's vital chairmanship, Stuart Glover acted as a dynamic full-time artistic director to implement the committee's plans (previously the committee was assisted in its voluntary efforts by only part-time staffing). Aims were to increase the festival's engagement with contemporary publishing trends, to attract a wider demographic, including more young readers and writers, and a more diverse range of writers, representing a wider range of writing topics. And we also wanted to celebrate Queensland writing. So there were new sessions on political issues, food and travel writing, and more on culturally diverse topics. Comedy panels and performances in a variety of venues also enhanced the BWF's offerings. Stuart later continued this role with gifted writer Mary-Rose MacColl as chair. He was followed by the equally innovative Carol Davidson, who, working under the board's direction, enlarged the festival further. It was exhilarating being part of the Queensland writing scene in those formative years, although they now seem a very long time ago ...



Warana Writers Week Precursor, 1986

Laurie Muller

Nick Earls debuted as part of the broader Warana Festival in 1986, as a wandering talent. He was ensconced within a large storytelling armchair for children in the city Botanic Gardens. He sat within the frame of the chair, his vision and voice through a gauze grill and his own arms within the movable arms of the chair. The kids loved the stories it told. Nick was also a medical doctor and to his alarm he sighted a heat-distressed, overweight woman heading for the chair before flopping down on it. He diagnosed that she was having a serious medical issue and talked calmly to her to lower her agitation as he phoned for an ambulance. She was treated successfully and is probably still puzzled at the help given to her by the armchair. Nick was then given a short gig as a poet at Warana Writers Week and this led to a discussion with me about being published, which led ultimately to a very successful career as a writer. That's serendipity for you.

13 To Call Yourself a Writer

Edwina Shaw

When I attended my first BWF, in 1990, I knew I wanted to be a writer. I just didn't have any idea how to go about it. I'd studied literature at university in the mid-1980s - that was as close as you could get to studying writing back then. But all that tearing texts apart and criticism hadn't inspired me to write. Instead, it had the opposite effect. I stopped writing at all, except for my journal. I even stopped reading.

However, on my return to Brisbane, once it was safe to put my feet back where Joh's police had lurked like fat lazy sharks in my youth, I ventured to my first Writers Festival - then part of Warana. The urge to write had risen in me again and I was trying my hand at some short pieces. I remember a session at The Edge, with free newspapers on the seats, Nick Earls on stage alongside handsome Veny Armano. These young guns, not much older than me, made it seem possible for me to one day be a writer too. I roamed from session to session alone that day, too shy to speak to anyone, soaking up ideas and information, feeling like at last I'd found my people.

It was a while before I found my way back to BWF - living in Cambodia and Germany, and having small children, kept me away. But all those years, the yearning to write grew stronger and I finally gathered my courage, submitted stories and applied for a master's degree in Creative Writing at UQ. To my delight I was accepted and in 2003, for the first time, I found myself on stage at BWF, a participant in the UQ student readings. I'm sure I flushed bright red and my voice shook as much as my hands but, that day, I started to believe that my dream of becoming a writer would come true.

Since then, I've attended the BWF every year. I love this festival where writers come together. We are such solitary creatures, spending our days alone in rooms, playing with words and living in our imaginations. But, when we come together, we share what we learn through all this solitude - a festival of philosophy and ideas, words and wonder, faith and courage and connection. Books anchored me to life when I was young, and writing has helped me create beauty from the challenges I've faced. We talk about these things at BWF.

I was there when Lionel Shriver, in her Mexican hat, sent people away furious and added a petrol tanker of fuel to the Own Voices movement. I've witnessed with joy the emergence of First Nations voices and diverse writers of every stripe. I've attended workshops and panels and interviews and, over recent years, I've been an interviewer and panel host. I've introduced my best writing buddy's book, realising a long-held dream of us being on stage together at the BWF. I've moderated panels, for my own books and for others. I've met many wonderful writers, each of them with their own unique voice and stories to tell. I don't wander alone anymore.

The writers I once gazed at, too in awe of to approach, are now friends. It took many years and books on shelves to make me realise I'd achieved my dream at last. On that stage at BWF, I stood in front of the crowd holding up my own book and for the first time introduced myself as a writer.

14A Weekend to a Week, Warana 1984–96 Laurie Muller

Having returned to Brisbane in 1984 after a four-year absence in Sydney, I was expecting a quieter life at University of Queensland Press. Perhaps I should have been wary of the welcome-back call from John Collins of Jacaranda Press.

“You are just the bloke we want on the Literary Arts Committee of the Warana Festival,” he shrewdly put to me. Knowing John well, saying no wasn’t an option.

I rolled up for my first meeting of what was then Warana Writers Weekend committee, influenced for many years by the indefatigable Maureen Freer and ably assisted by the equally indefatigable Joan Priest. Each spring, as part of the long-running Warana Festival, this committee organised a convivial weekend for local writers to intermingle with writers from interstate. It seemed an amiable and non-onerous task, so I agreed to do my bit.

The weekend was for writers, by writers, with limited public access or interaction. I was surprised, given the exceptional writing talent on show and felt a guilty pleasure at enjoying the privilege. I was also aware of how good the Adelaide Writers Week was and wondered if there wasn’t an opportunity to do something similar in Brisbane, as neither Sydney nor Melbourne had shown any initiative in that regard.

The good folk on the committee decided to test the idea to add more public access to the 1985 weekend and took up the offer of the use of a largish lecture hall at QUT (then QIT), just opposite the Botanic Gardens. The then literary editor of the *The Courier-Mail* gave the program a spiteful bagging on the Saturday prior, but that didn’t deter the book readers of Brisbane turning up in good numbers to meet their favourite authors.

The chair of the committee became vacant and I was coerced to take on the role. We set about planning a Writers Week for 1986 and took a proposal to the Warana Festival and received approval to fund it through a three-way split between the festival, governments (state and federal) and publishers.

At this time there was only the biennial Adelaide Writers Week, which had started back in 1960. We learned that Melbourne was considering adding one to their Spoleto Festival and Canberra a smaller scale version.

Being respectful of Adelaide’s high reputation and not wishing to clash or diminish their excellent event, I met with Writers Week director Rose Wight to advise that we wished to complement them and not compete. We planned to celebrate Australian authors and their writing, would not be seeking international writers and would liaise closely as they planned every second year, to ensure no clashes. They in turn were very helpful in sharing what they had learned over the decades.

We approached the Queensland Cultural Centre Trust for the use of the South Bank Auditorium and that was generously provided free of charge for all the main events, together with the use of theatres within the Queensland Art Gallery for ancillary events. This meant Warana Writers Week would be free to the general public, allowing spontaneous attendance, one of the great aspects of Adelaide’s success. Warana Writers Week now had a home.

The response from invitations sent to Australian writers was exceptional, allowing the creation of a wide-ranging program that triggered invaluable publicity and generated enthusiastic attendance. Warana Writers Week was a demonstrative success!

By 1987, Writers Week added some major national awards for Australian writing, which became integral to the event.

The Steele Rudd Award for Australian short-story writing was created and funded by the Queensland government. The winner received a substantial cash prize together with a unique trophy sculpted by a Churchill Fellowship awardee. Thea Astley was the inaugural winner, setting a very high mark.

The David Unaipon Award for an unpublished Aboriginal or Torres Strait writer was created and initially funded by UQP, and later became a part of the Queensland Premiers Literary Awards and then the Queensland Literary Awards. It was ground breaking and became the starting point for the careers of many greatly respected Aboriginal writers, such as Melissa Lucashenko, Ellen van Neerven, Herb Wharton, Alexis Wright, Sam Wagan Watson, Larissa Behrendt, Jackie Huggins, Eve Fesl, Tara June Winch, Doris Pilkington and Tony Birch, among others.

The Judith Wright Calanthe Award for poetry, also funded by the Queensland government, became a most sought-after award by Australian poets.

The 1988 Writers Week was an ambitious one set within a major arts festival created for Expo 88 and backlit against the political turmoil swirling around the Fitzgerald Inquiry and the fallout against the government led by Johannes Bjelke-Petersen. They were heady days during a period of great change and the Writers Week panels addressed the issues without fear or favour, and the event thrived. The head of the Expo Arts Festival, Anthony Steel, reckoned it was the best show in town.

Warana Writers Week ran in this format until 1996, when it then morphed into the Brisbane Writers Festival. I feel privileged to have steered the ship from 1985 to 1990 and believe we laid a very sound foundation and created a reputation that has stood the test of time.

15 The Pied Piper Morris Gleitzman

I first spoke at the Brisbane Writers Festival more than twenty years ago. I've forgotten exactly when, but I do remember how relaxed I felt stepping onto the stage, which was delightfully outdoors and happily positioned next to my favourite subtropical State Library.

It was only the second time I'd worked in Brisbane. The first was when I'd written material for the governor-general at Expo 88, an experience that turned out to be quite complicated and a bit stressful. I was quietly confident this experience would be neither.

I realised I was wrong when I caught sight of the audience. A couple of hundred middle- and upper-primary kids sitting cross-legged on the lawn. Many of them were waving copies of my books, which the governor-general hadn't done, so I was already liking this experience much more. Until I realised the kids weren't so much waving the books as using them to shield their eyes from the full blazing force of the sunlight in which they'd been seated.

This was a quandry. Talking at other festivals I'd sometimes used a sunlight metaphor when enthusing about the power of stories to sustainably recharge our imaginations and illuminate at least some of the possibilities of our lives. But metaphors are one thing, the actual searing cellular threat of harsh UV another. I was scheduled to talk for an hour, and I could already hear future dermatologists tut-tutting.

We fiction writers love unexpected problems for our characters, but not so much for our audiences. I considered the options. Shade wouldn't be reaching the lawn for well over an hour. Asking the organisers to move the library a few metres to the left would probably create budget problems. The tube of sunblock in my bag wouldn't stretch past row five, row three if I also did shins and ankles.

Desperate, I sought inspiration from children's literature. I had no flute with me, or curly-toed medieval running shoes, but taking a leaf out of the Pied Piper of Hamelin's book still seemed the best option.

"Follow me, kids," I said. "I will take you to a better place." And I intended to do just that. But the teachers didn't feel that an underground carpark was a better place, not compared to the room with soft carpet and a ceiling that the organisers eventually found, and looking back I think they were right.

None of this would happen today, of course. The BWF has grown into one of our nation's highest quality cultural experiences, gloriously equipped to overstimulate our subconscious while leaving all our subcutaneous bits safely in the dark.

And for that we love it.

Warana Writers Week early, 1990s Laurie Muller

Some events in those early years of Warana Writers Week were held in the grand, newly refurbished Customs House. Appearing there in one afternoon session was the distinguished Aboriginal novelist and poet Herb Wharton, also renowned for his laconic humour. As the afternoon drew to a close Herb was required to go up river to Parliament House for poetry readings in the Red Room, the now unused upper house chamber. My wife Glen and I offered to walk with him, but as we left Customs House just on dusk we were startled to find tied up to the wharf at the Riverside Centre, the replica of HMAS *Endeavour* lit up and with a huge spotlit British flag waving in the breeze. Herb didn't even break stride as he passed and chuckled, "Not that bloody mob back again. We had enough trouble with them last time."

16 Love That YA Rhianna Patrick

If it wasn't for young adult (YA) fiction, I'm not sure I would have regained my love of reading as an adult or attended a writers festival.

While I'd regularly read for work over the years, I'd fallen out of the habit of reading for the love of it.

That was until I found YA, a category that didn't really exist when I was the same age as the main protagonists I was reading about.

When I first dipped my toe back in, it was at a YA roadshow from a book publisher where I got to see firsthand how loved these books were by those in attendance.

I sat at the back of the room and watched the "oohing and ahing" of the audience at the releases they could expect in the coming year. I watched the outpouring of love and excitement fill the room as book covers were revealed, story lines spoken about and characters introduced, those whose lives you never knew you'd get so invested in.

From that moment I was hooked! How was it that I'd completely missed being a part of this fun book-loving, book-reading and book-stagramming community?

It was YA that ultimately got me to my first Brisbane Writers Festival. Prior to that I'd never been.

I don't know why but it never seemed like a place where a non-reader like myself was really welcomed. I wasn't reading the bestselling books or the ones that everyone was talking about. It just wasn't on my radar unless it was a book by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander author and, even then, I often met these authors through the work I was doing at the time and not by attending writers festivals.

What I found with YA though was a community of all ages who just loved the books they were reading. A way to get excited about reading again and finding a way back into picking up a book because I wanted to, not because I had to.

For me, reading YA is about reading local stories. YA stories from Australian authors are the only ones I read. I might dabble with an international YA read here and there but my loyalty lies with the stories from the country where I live. I think it's important to support what we have here first, and the Australian YA author community are a wonderful bunch, both online and in real life.

Fast forward to now and I can't wait each year for Love YA, and to be in a room with my book-loving, book-reading peers. To be introduced to books I haven't read yet or authors I know little about but who captivate me with the stories they've poured their hearts and countless hours into writing.

I've found where I feel welcomed now and each year I look forward to a day filled with book love, followed by dinner with a community who love talking about books!

17 In a Room Full of Plates Jane Caro

I love the room with the plates. I have lost count of the sessions I have participated in with my back to the huge display of crockery - dainty cups and saucers and plates - for the annual Brisbane Writers Festival, held in the State Library of Queensland. (A sudden thought: why aren't more writers festivals held in state libraries? It's an obvious synchronicity, surely?) But back to the topic at hand. Almost all of the sessions were fun, except one, when the weather turned feral and a howling gale drove horizontal rain onto half our audience, causing them to flee the session, long before we had finished. It's amazing I haven't been in more sessions so disrupted, given that the other end of the imposing plates room is completely open to the elements. Maybe the designers knew Covid was in our future and that a well-ventilated - and then some - room would one day have a great deal to offer.

But there is one session in that room I will never forget.

It must have been 2011 or possibly 2012. My first novel had just been published. *Just a Girl*, a YA novel about Elizabeth Tudor, was the first volume in a then-planned, now-realised trilogy covering her life from birth to death. I thought I knew why I had embarked on what a friend had called "a big, hairy, audacious goal" when I sat down in the session. I thought it was because I'd seen some of my fellow participants in a writers group I'd attended for years getting some interest from publishers. All of their works in progress had been written as part of an established genre. Wanting - like almost all writers - to stop scribbling in a garret (aka at a kitchen table) and get actual readers, I abandoned the "great novel" I was trying to write (it was rubbish) and wondered what genre I could bear to tackle. Crime? Not clever enough to come up with a plot. Science fiction? Don't even read them; how could I write them? Romance? Pass me a bucket! History? Well, yes, maybe - lots of research, but I like history and read widely about it anyway. Who do I already know a lot about (lazy writer's guide to cutting back on research 101) and would enjoy finding out more? There was only one answer to that - Elizabeth I had been a hero since childhood and I had voraciously consumed just about everything written or produced about her. It'd be a cinch.

Of course it wasn't a cinch and I found out just how much I did not know when I actually sat down to write about my idol. I had not realised the depth of neglect she had experienced in her lonely childhood, to the point where she had no clothes to wear that actually fitted, and no, I did not make this up - it is documented fact. Her father hated to be reminded of her tragic mother and the biggest reminder, of course, was this damned daughter they shared who should have been a boy. Indeed, had Elizabeth been a boy, Anne Boleyn would never have lost her head. What a burden for any child to live with.

I enjoyed all the research I had to do and I not only managed to get the book written, but I found a publisher (thank you Kristina Schultz at UQP) and was starting to gain readers. The book, I am delighted to say, has since been reprinted multiple times. However, I was still labouring under a misapprehension about what my motives for writing the book actually were.

It was a school girl who enlightened me. A tiny slip of a thing in a slightly too-big-for-her uniform sitting in the front row of my session. When we got to the questions from the audience – it was the schools day of the festival, so school students made up the entire audience – she was quick to put up her hand.

“Did you realise you were rewriting the Cinderella myth when you wrote *Just a Girl?*” she asked.

My jaw dropped open. My mind was whirring and clicking at warp speed as something bubbled up from my subconscious and snapped into place in response to her remarkable insight.

“No, I did not!” I replied when I had gathered my thoughts enough to speak. “But you are quite right, and you have also helped me understand why Elizabeth I has always been my idol.”

Then I leaned forward, warming to my theme as insight upon insight tumbled into my brain.

“All the stories I was told as a girl – including Cinderella – were about young women as victims living neglected half-lives until a prince arrived to rescue them, but Elizabeth didn’t wait to be rescued by some bloke. Instead, almost alone in her era and for many eras thereafter, Elizabeth actively rejected princes – including many actual ones. Instead, she became her own prince and rescued herself!”

I now realise, as I await the imminent release of my fourth novel – and the first written for adults – that I always write fiction around the theme of women refusing to give away power, holding on to power and wielding that power. Yet, just as happened at that long ago BWF, surrounded by plates and bookish school kids (well, some of them), I never realise what is motivating me to pursue a particular story until I have finished it. Well and truly finished it too, by the way. While I am writing, I just follow blindly where my muse takes me. Take my latest novel, *The Mother*, for example. It wasn’t until months after I had finished the final proofs that I realised my book was a metaphor for the way women across the world are refusing to remain victims of patriarchy any longer and are finally daring to take back power.

I suspect I was only able to have that insight, belated though it was, thanks to the slip of a girl in a room full of plates at the Brisbane Writers Festival.



A woman with long brown hair, wearing a light-colored ribbed crop top and dark shorts, is singing passionately into a black microphone. Her eyes are closed, and her mouth is wide open. She has a tattoo on her left upper arm. The background is dark and out of focus.

18A Sense of Connection

Mirandi Riwoe

Long before I'd ever heard of the Warana Writers Convention (from the first gathering in 1962) or even the Brisbane Writers Festival, the word "Warana" held such pleasure and excitement for me. I grew up in Brisbane in the 1970s and 1980s, a Eurasian girl, part Irish-English, part Chinese-Indonesian. Back then there were not that many Asians here in Brisbane, but there was a lovely little Indonesian community and we often had parties with singalongs, dancing and, of course, plenty of delicious food and, occasionally, we took part in the Warana Festival.

One very exciting year, I got to wear traditional Indonesian clothing and travel through town on a float with other children dressed in their own traditional attire. My chest and legs were wrapped firmly in gold and yellow batik, and I wore a necklace of silver and a headdress of white flowers. I sat next to a Greek boy and we smiled and waved to the crowds as we passed along the streets. Another year, we all traipsed onto the stage at Brisbane City Hall to play the angklung, a Sundanese bamboo instrument, and I waited nervously for Pak Partoredjo to point at me to play my note. The Warana Festival was always a fantastic way to celebrate our community.

Lately, we have all really learned the value of community and connection and, here in Brisbane, the Brisbane Writers Festival is so important to our community of readers and writers. I remember attending BWF as a reader and, each time, cherishing that rare and fleeting connection to writers. Hanging on to every crime-writing word from Val McDermid. Listening to Matthew Reilly discuss publication and character. Having a lovely, quiet chat with Peter Temple as he signed his book for my mum. And later, as a burgeoning author, meeting up with my romance-writer friends at their special tent at the festival and, later still, discussing a contentious opening speech with other authors over beer and pizza.

BWF has always been a festival of ideas and community, inspiring and connecting people who have a love of writing and reading. I believe this sense of connection, which, for me, used to be simply pleasant or fun, has turned into something much more crucial.

19Thanks BWF

Ellen van Neerven

Looking back, I don't remember the exact year but let's say the first Brisbane Writers Festival I attended was in 2011. I have many wonderful memories of seeing some incredible guests such as Anita Heiss, Dave Eggers, Simon Armitage, Maxine Beneba Clarke and Nardi Simpson. I had always wanted to be a writer and BWF was where I could see the dream of being a published writer become possible, with local writers sharing the stage with international stars. There's something about your home festival that's always going to be iconic. I have loved every BWF I have been part of. It's always been a great place to meet people, form friendships and feel inspired. Thanks BWF.



20 Warana Writers Week 1992

Sue Gough

It came as a complete surprise when Laurie Muller, General Manager of University of Queensland Press, and visionary creator of what was then known as Warana Writers Week, asked me to run the event in 1992. I think I had been on the committee for a couple of years and to the best of my belief was the first woman to take over the Writers Week reins. However, I do acknowledge that I was following in the footsteps of poet Maureen Freer, who had single-handedly organised a number of independent writers festivals in the past that brought overseas writers to Brisbane. Her work on the committee was invaluable and she had great stories to tell of dealing with literary celebrities. I believe Philip Roth was one of her more interesting house guests. The emphasis of Warana Writers Week (which would later morph into the Brisbane Writers Festival) was more inward looking in those days. In fact the festival called itself “an Australian literary celebration”, and claimed it was the nation’s largest gathering of Australian writers. One of the only overseas writers I remember attending was New Zealander Witi Ihimaera.

The term “chair” had a pretty loose connotation back then. Yes, you chaired a committee but you were also responsible for contacting prospective writers, putting the program together, creating the publicity, negotiating with stakeholders, sponsors and venues, and generally running the show itself. You were in fact chair, director and manager. The very experienced committee gave advice, organised the literary competitions that ran in tandem with the festival, delivered wine to the winners and picked up writers from the airport. And, of course, it was all completely voluntary and the festival itself was free. I still have no idea why Laurie Muller thought I was up to it because as a freelance writer and editor I had no managerial experience whatsoever. I think he must have been snowed by my general enthusiasm for writers and writing. My first lesson in running a festival taught me that the physicists are right when they claim that “whatever can happen will happen”. In other words, most crises are unavoidable because they are unpredictable.

My first experience with this phenomenon occurred on the morning of the opening ceremony. The current Queensland governor, the premier and the lord mayor, among others, had all accepted invitations to attend. I spent a long time trying to get my salutations in order: Your Excellency, the Honourable, your Worship and so on. Not one of them turned up. Not one of them apologised. I remember saying they had better not have gone to the footie – which I think they had. The big rugby union final was being held in Sydney that weekend.

It was just as well I was able to hold on to my enthusiasm because it kept me flying by the seat of my pants towards a festival I was ultimately proud of, although so much of what the committee and I pulled off was the result of serendipity. For instance, our primary funder, the Warana Festival, Brisbane’s annual romp of bread and circuses, would select one overseas country to focus on each year. For 1992 it would be China, and they would pay for four Chinese writers to come to the festival. Who did I want to invite?

Where could I start to get some advice? It was sheer luck that I found a young Chinese writer called Sang Ye, who had married a teacher at Brisbane Grammar

School. He and his wife came to dinner and put me in touch with knowledgeable Chinese experts like Nicholas Jose. It so happened that China was just over its cultural revolutionary phase, and the voices of more radical writers were being heard again. With Nicholas’s help I invited four of these radical writers and all four accepted.

They were an amazing bunch. Yang Xianyi was an elderly Oxford graduate who, along with his English wife Gladys, had become one of China’s most eminent translators. Mang Ke, lovingly referred to as Monkey, was a hippy poet who had been imprisoned as a counter-revolutionary. Wang Meng, novelist and former minister of culture, had also served time during the Cultural Revolution. The presence of these four would provide plenty of drama. They were well aware that, among the many local Chinese who came to hear them, there would be individuals who were there to report back to the Chinese authorities. One intrepid questioner asked Yang Xianyi how he felt about this.

“What can they do to me that they have not already done?” he answered poignantly. It turned out that, during their persecution by the Red Brigades, Gladys had been imprisoned in a cell with murderers and their only son had committed suicide. “And now Gladys is an alcoholic,” Yan Xianyi said in a most matter-of-fact voice.

I became aware that a number of locals opposed our inviting the Chinese. The most vocal of these was society hairdresser Willy Bach, who had become vehemently anti-Chinese after serving in Vietnam. He turned up at the festival ready to rumble. It took some persuading for him to accept that these were actually the good guys. I narrowly averted an embarrassing public protest.

The high point of their visit was a Chinese banquet in the Valley. We had a dazzling guest list of ambassadors, ex-ambassadors, poets, playwrights and novelists. There were instant connections in spite of the language difference: I overheard Frank Hardy and Wang Meng exchanging prison stories via an interpreter. While the atmosphere among the writers was warm, the atmosphere in the restaurant was distinctly cool. The food simply did not arrive. Meanwhile, the booze flowed. I tried to find out what was going on. The manager of the restaurant told me he had costed the evening on the understanding that people would be sitting at tables for ten but this was not happening. Some people were forming tables of eight. Until everyone formed tables of ten no food would be forthcoming. I did a mixture of threatening and grovelling until finally food appeared. When it came time for our eminent translator to get up and make his speech it was obvious that he was somewhat under the weather. He kept leaning so heavily on the lectern that it was in danger of falling over. I despatched someone to sit in front of it and hold it up and Yang Xianyi delivered a delightful quatrain in Chinese and English that told us that he felt thoroughly at home.

Halfway into the week, dealing with crises became second nature. Jan Power, who was to have chaired a panel with Wendy Harmer and Kaz Cooke, rang at the last minute to say she had mistakenly put ti-tree oil in her eyes instead of eyedrops and couldn’t come because she was temporarily blind. Well that sure beat the old dog-eat-my-homework excuse and was only a minor blip. There was much worse to come.

There were some parts of the program that were immutable: poetry readings at Old Government House; Tirra Lirra on the River, a traditional jaunt on the pseudo paddle steamer the *Kookaburra Queen*, with readings and much wine; and, of course, a very laid-back night at the Irish Club. I had tried to make the program more innovative by offering a “literary hypothetical” dinner event, Geoffrey Robertson’s television

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1962

WARANA WRITERS CONVENTION

PROGRAMME



29th and 30th September 1962.
in

BRISBANE WOMENS CLUBROOMS
148 Adelaide Street, Brisbane
(opposite Finneys).

* * *

SATURDAY 29th SEPTEMBER 1962.

CHAIRMAN MRS LUCILLE KING, B.Sc., M.Sc.

- 9.30 a.m. Introduction of Conference & Welcome,
MRS ROSE PADGET
- 10.0 a.m. ILLUSTRATING - MR DAVID COX
- 11.0 a.m. Morning Tea
- 11.15 a.m. SHORT STORIES "Short Stories for Money"
E. E. MAHONY
- 12.30 p.m. Lunch
- 1.30 p.m. OFFICIAL OPENING by MR RICHARD WILSON,
M.A., Dip.Ed.
- 2.0 p.m. NOVEL - DR RUTH SMOUT, M.B., B.S.
- 3.30 p.m. Afternoon Tea
- 3.45 p.m. PUBLISHING - MR FRANK THOMPSON,
B.A., M.A.
- 4.30 p.m. PANEL - MISS A. SYKES, B.A.
MR J. PENBERTHY
MR GUY BATHAM
- Subject, "What I would like to see for
Australian Writing,"
- 6.0 p.m. Dinner
- 7.0 p.m. DRAMA - MISS EUNICE HANGER, M.A.
MISS JOAN WHALLEY
- 9.30 p.m. CLOSE

* * *

hypotheticals being all the rage at the time. It was to be run by *Courier-Mail* journo Peter Charlton. The nine-strong cast were a hand-picked bunch of the top luminaries of the day. I shudder now when I read the program invitation that boasted: “Australia’s top writers, publishers and critics will bare all in an evening of scandalous literary revelation. This promises to be *the* literary dinner event of the season.” What could possibly go wrong?

Disaster was precipitated by a pre-event collision between the chair and the cast. Charlton was notoriously right wing. The cast were predominantly left wing and full of revolutionary zeal. They demanded a rehearsal with Charlton. Charlton refused to meet with them and flew to Sydney for the rugby final. The cast then mutinied and refused to cooperate with him when and if he returned. I was between a rock and a very hard place and Charlton was interstate and incommunicado. The cast insisted they could run the occasion themselves. Well, tickets had been bought, food had been prepared. I felt I had no choice but to go with the writers. It wasn’t a good decision. Charlton unfriended me big time and the cast were absolutely woeful when it came to the crunch. Without the whip-cracking adrenalin input of a good ringmaster their performances were as exciting as wilted lettuce. It was one of those evenings you want to forget. Needless to say, there were letters of complaint from the audience. I think someone used the term “hypathetical”. I don’t blame them.

The most personally humiliating moment is one I can laugh about now. Having to be at the venue from early in the morning till the end of program each day, the venue manager had kindly told me to park my car in one of the two disabled car spots in the auditorium car park. I was up at the mic thanking the participants of a panel when a furious woman on crutches struggled her way up the aisle and up the steps onto the platform. She grabbed the mic from me and let fly.

“What I want to know is who is the *arsehole* who has parked in the spot for the disabled?”

In front of a hall full of people I had to tell her it was me. I don’t think my explanation helped. It is the most public shaming I have ever experienced.

Why is it so easy to remember the disasters when there were so many highlights from those early years? For instance: a young David Marr talking about his newly published biography of Patrick White; Rodney Hall, Robert Drewe and Marina Warner (can’t remember how we scored this illustrious English historian and novelist) talking about “The Myths of Time”; poet icons like Gwen Harwood and David Rowbotham chaired by Geoffrey Dutton; and the very young Venero Armano, Nick Earls and Andrew McGahan making their first festival appearances. What made their appearances first up on the Saturday morning particularly dramatic was the fact that Venero and Nick had both had their newly published short story collections savaged in the arts pages of the weekend papers. They somehow survived and performed professionally.

There is one particular experience that I carry away from the 1992 festival. I was keen to include more Indigenous voices on the panels. I persuaded Jackie Huggins to come on board, although she had misgivings because her biographical work *Sister Girl* was still in its final editing stage. Another older Indigenous writer, Herb Wharton, was an unknown quantity. UQP had just published *Unbranded*, his memoir as a Queensland stockman. It was the first panel on the Sunday morning and I watched Herb walk over to the mic and then drop his head and say nothing. There was an

awkward silence and I thought, “Oh no! He’s shy and this is going to be humiliating for him and embarrassing for everyone.” How wrong I was. He began to talk slowly, gathering his thoughts, and then took us out into the bush as he rode his horse. He said that he always read when he was out riding and I think we all had a picture of him jogging along with a book resting on the pommel of his saddle ...but then, subtly and without any “gotcha” moment, it became apparent that what he was reading was the land. It was the gentlest of all lessons that taught the multiplicity of ways we can define the act of reading. I remember him telling us that he could never understand how those explorers got lost – until he understood that they simply could not read.

I learned a great deal during the course of that and subsequent festivals. Most importantly I think I learned to listen, especially to the quiet ones who often had much more to say than some of the high profile “performers”. Writers are often shy people and, while they want to be seen and heard, they are not always at home in the spotlight, being more used to communing with their computer screens. It takes a good chair to bring out the best in a writer: I have watched Richard Fidler with a kind of awe as he gives his interviewees the respect of knowing their work, and the sensitivity to create a safe space for them to share their ideas and experiences. I have also cringed when chairs inveigle themselves into the spotlight. Above all, I have witnessed the generosity that writers display to one another and the joy they get from being with one another at a festival.

More than forty years ago I had authored *Written in Sand*, the definitive history of Fraser Island. Although I had written every word of it, my name did not appear on the cover. It is a long story and I won’t bore you with it here. The good news is that, because of my knowledge of the island and its area, I was deputised as one of the hosts for the overseas writers retreats that we ran at Kingfisher Bay prior to every festival.

A great deal can happen in four days on an island. For instance, my co-host, radio commentator and thriller writer Sandy McCutcheon, met his future wife Susannah Clarke, who was the *Courier-Mail* photographer covering the event one year. Excuse me if I talk out of turn but I think we also had the Guinness Book record for the shortest time it took for two people to hook up once they stepped ashore. And Kristina Olssen, who was the journo doing the story for the *Courier*, went on to become an award-winning writer herself.

Generally the overseas writers were wowed by their Fraser Island experiences. Not so surprising considering they were mugged by whales (one English writer described this as a spiritual experience), saw dingoes and brumbies, travelled through some of the world’s most spectacular rainforest, swam in the arctic blue of perched lakes, ate bush tucker and drank excellent Australian wines.

I did have to placate Yann Martell, who had just won the Booker for *Life of Pi*, because he was disappointed that he did not have a sea view. I managed to explain that, while all the sea views were very distant, his view straight into the swamp was where all the action took place. The timely arrival of a technicolour kingfisher persuaded him that I was right.

There was the odd misfit. One year we had invited an American academic, famous for his biography of Graham Green. All our contact had been via his secretary at the university where he was a professor. She failed to tell us that he had advanced dementia. I’m not sure how he managed the flight from the US to Australia but once he arrived it became apparent that he was away with the fairies. I took the best care

of him I could on the ferry over to the island. He misread the signs and promptly propositioned me as bed companion for that night. Bonnie Bryant, author of the popular Saddle Club novels for teenage girls, had an even closer encounter. She told me she was woken in the middle of the night by the unmistakable sound of a man peeing into her toilet. Yes, it was our aged Lothario, who should never have been allowed out without a carer.

One of the most memorable guests I can remember was Norman Doidge, who wrote *The Brain that Changes Itself*. It was a privilege to talk with him over dinner about the new discoveries in neuroscience, and it turned out we were to see the result of these innovations at first hand. A woman approached him after his panel appearance with the tragic story of her nineteen-year-old daughter who, after a stroke, now suffered from “locked-in syndrome”. This is a ghastly condition where the person is fully aware of what is happening around them but is totally unable to respond in any way. Was there anything that could be done to help her? Norman knew it was unheard of for anyone to be cured of this cruel condition; however, he made a number of suggestions as to how the girl’s neural pathways might be stimulated. He returned to our writers festival a couple of years later with a new book, and the same mother was there in the audience with her daughter, who was now in a wheelchair, able to speak and move her upper body, and well on the way to being able to walk.

My rather ambivalent relationship with Fraser Island took a new and positive turn as a result of those hosting experiences. I confess I took some wicked advantages of what I saw and heard on those retreats and recast them into a novel that would be published by Picador. This time my name was definitely there on the cover.

Is it really sixty years since the inception of the festival? It seems like something we take for granted, like the ABC. I know the festival has had its ups and downs depending on the abilities of the director (a special mention here to Jane O’Hara, who I thought was the best of the best) and has produced the odd disappointment (think Germaine Greer’s woefully unprepared opening speech) and even some woke outrage (think Lionel Shriver’s provocative vision of how writers would increasingly be pushed to self-censor). All those dramas, successes and failures are mere surface tension. What I love about the festival above all is its ability to provoke, debate and open dialogues that continue long after the festival is over.

21 Unbroken on That Wave Dominic McGann

During my time on the board of the Brisbane Writers Festival, we were fortunate to host each festival at Kurilpa Point with Maiwar eddying and flowing nearby. As it has been a meeting point for millennia for the Turrbul and Yuggera people, it was wonderful to be able to join that continuing history, to see writers share their stories and for all to learn new ones.

There were many highlights but I have a particular affection for the poems of Maggie Walsh and Robert Adamson, and their relaxed, engaging and innocent contributions in 2015. On a separate note, BWF@2016 offered a more animated festival following the keynote address by Lionel Shriver. Importantly, while each festival has its own character, in a broader sense, it is useful to reflect on these lines from Gregory O’Brien in 2016, which offer a perspective for that festival and, indeed, all festivals:

It was a wave
that delivered us
to this rock and a rock

that placed us, shaken
but unbroken,
back upon that wave.



Warana Writers Week, 1989

Laurie Muller

A wonderful New Zealand Māori poet named Hone Tūwhare, who was New Zealand's Poet Laureate, participated in the 1989 Warana Writers Week. He had a terrific sense of humour and was greatly impressed by the ingenuity of Cliff Watego, an Aboriginal writer and poet, who'd arranged to visit him at the Bellevue Hotel in George Street. Cliff arrived by motorbike and Hone greeted him in the foyer, but Cliff being concerned at someone stealing his motorbike walked it into the lift and stored it in Hone's sixth-floor room while they went out for a meal. At a later poetry session at South Bank a would-be poet asked Hone for advice on how to become a poet and Hone's great answer was, "I really don't know – poetry is like seagull shit – one day you go out and it's on ya."

22A Short Voyage of Discovery

Garth Nix

One of the best things about being at the Brisbane Writers Festival is the accidental discovery of matters of interest. Often, of course, it is a straightforward encounter with books and/or authors that I would otherwise not know about, but it can also be all kinds of other matters that catch my mind from talks and panels, in conversations to and from the venues, over tea in the Green Room, at lunch or dinner or drinks late in the night. The discoveries might be literary ones, scientific, historical, perhaps purely publishing gossip. Scores of curious threads to follow later, or to be forgotten, purposefully or not.

The last time I was at the festival, I made a discovery both historical and concrete – or perhaps I should say steely – connected to a book that is a very old favourite of mine. One of the great benefits of being at the festival is its location at South Bank, amid the cultural hub that includes the State Library, Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art, the Performing Arts Centre and more. There is always a lot to do and see in addition to the festival itself. One of the places I had been meaning to visit for years and had never got around to was the Queensland Maritime Museum, which I finally managed to visit one morning before a session at the festival.

I love nautical history and I love maritime museums. The Queensland one is excellent, and there I found the well-preserved World War Two vessel HMAS *Diamantina*, a River-class frigate, the last of its kind anywhere in the world. The same class as the ship that is the focus of the second half of one of the best books ever written about the war at sea, and in my opinion (shared by many) also one of the best novels of the twentieth century: *The Cruel Sea* by Nicholas Monsarrat.

I didn't *need* to walk the deck of the *Diamantina*, gaze out from the bridge or delve into the engine room. The novel is evocative enough. But visiting the ship did add an extra dimension to the story I knew well, impressing me once again with Monsarrat's ability to tell such a human story within the potentially overwhelming and competing raw story potential of the ship, the war and the sea. Many books have been written with these elements, but most authors do not balance them well enough to make *everything* feel real.

I explored the *Diamantina*, and the rest of the museum. They had a small selection of nautically related secondhand books in the museum shop, rather denuded after I bought four books I'd never heard of and would never have seen if I hadn't wandered in. I took them back to add to the pile of newer books I had discovered through the course of the festival, and eventually took them home. But when I got back, the first thing I read was my old copy of *The Cruel Sea*, made subtly different and new for me by a few hours spent at the Queensland Maritime Museum, courtesy of the Brisbane Writers Festival.

23For the Love of Learning

Karl Kruszelnicki

The one thing that I love to pieces about writing – and writers festivals – is that you get to dive into somebody else's brain. You might read an astonishing autobiography of a very deep (or very kind) person and begin to learn from their work of a lifetime, or dive into a work of total fantasy, or get insights into the amazing universe around us. Or listen to those authors speak about their books.

Did you know that the current world record for diving to a great depth on a single breath of air you can stuff into your lungs is around 214 metres straight down – greater than the height of fifty-storey building! And we still don't fully understand how they do it. And that the current record for holding your breath underwater is over eleven minutes? (Speaking of gases, we still don't know how anaesthetic gases work. We know how to use them very safely. And we do know that if a gas dissolves well in olive oil, it might be a good anaesthetic gas – but how do they work on a molecular level? Dunno.)

Engineers have just learned how to make a wooden knife three times sharper than a steel knife, and wooden nails stronger than nails of steel or titanium (on a strength-for-weight basis). It turns out that cellulose (the most abundant organic polymer on Earth) is very strong. All you have to do is remove the weaker chemicals from the wood (lignin and hemicellulose), squash what's left at high pressure and 100°C for a few hours, and then waterproof it by soaking it in mineral oil for a few days. Bingo, a renewable organic material that is stronger than titanium.

(And, by the way, how does a spider make a thread that is stronger than steel – on a weight-for-weight basis – using only organic chemicals in processes that happen at room temperature, not thousands of degrees? Dunno that either.)

But we do know how to stop, and reverse, both climbing carbon dioxide levels and climate change, and how to bring them back to twentieth-century levels, using today's science. (Big hint – leave all carbon in the ground.) We know that since 1932 each generation is about 9 IQ points smarter than their parents. We know that we are living in the most peaceful time in history. And we know how to deal with Covid (updated vaccinations every six months?)

So, bearing in mind that predictions are very difficult to get right (especially those about the future), here's my ten cents' worth of prediction. By the end of this century (2099 or 2100 – I don't care), our descendants will use, as a *toy*, one of the four following current unsolved mysteries. The mysteries are the missing eight dimensions of the universe, dark matter (25 per cent of the universe), dark energy (70 per cent of the universe) and black holes. In 2099 (or 2100), you may well hear yourself saying, "Come on, Mary, stop playing with the black hole and dark energy and come in for lunch."

24A Leviathan Laura Elvery

In 2008 in a secondhand bookshop on Charing Cross Road in London I found a copy of a book called *Leviathan*, or *The Whale* by Philip Hoare. It featured plain black type on a thin white cover – an advance copy that of course wasn't meant to turn up in a store – and I don't know why I picked it up, but I did. I wasn't writing back then, but Hoare's book about whales, humans, literature and the ocean completely floored me. Later, bits of *Leviathan* crept into my early short stories in strange ways.

Ten years later it's a Friday night at the Brisbane Writers Festival and the next day I'll be on stage talking about my first book. I also have tickets to two weekend sessions with Philip Hoare, in Australia to spruik his new book, *Rising Tide Falling Star*. There's been a change of hosts and now it's Dr Karl on stage at The Edge Auditorium wearing some fabulous shirt, and beside him Philip is tanned and slender in a striped boatneck.

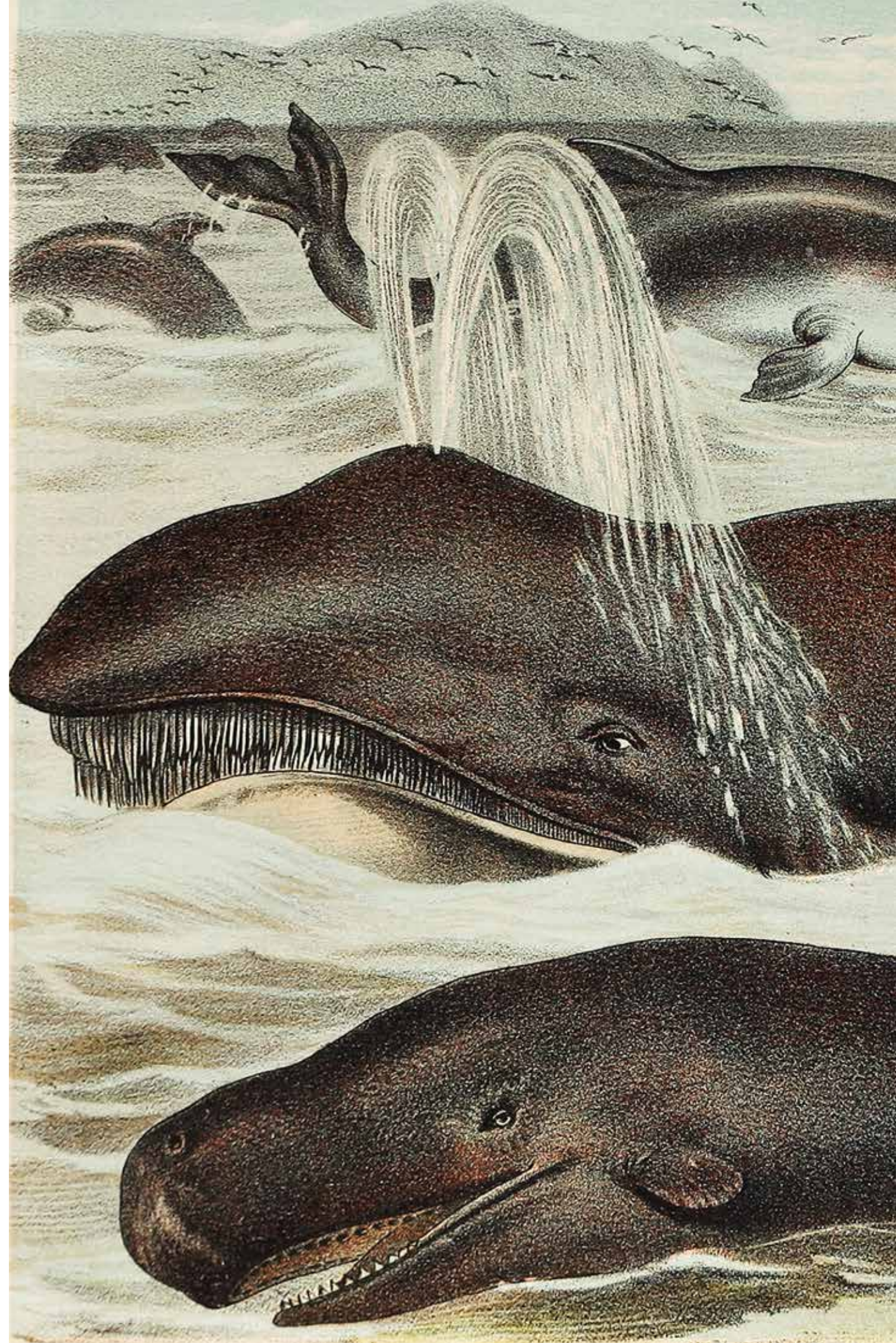
He talks beautifully about nature and the stars and whales, animated in his love for them. He tells us about the blisteringly icy swims he takes, almost daily, often with the moon out at night, sometimes in the middle of the day in the sea off Cape Cod. The Edge is a big venue and I'd arrived early to get a good spot. But the space never fills up. An inner voice nags me throughout: "Where is everybody? This is Philip Hoare!"

Afterwards I race to the signing table and, because I never care how enthusiastic I sound around writers I love, I explain how much that first book meant to me.

I can't stop myself from telling him that this is actually my first festival. As an author, I mean. I'm about to head to opening night drinks at the other end of Grey Street.

Philip signs his book, "For Laura – a fellow whale fanatic!"

He's thinking about something, then a moment later he reaches for his satchel and brings out the object he's made to celebrate the new book. In his hand is a little enamel brooch fashioned in the shape of a shooting star. I ask his publicist to take a photo of us. In it I look almost too delighted. He stands with his arms folded against his chest, smiling, small and weathered in his sailor stripes. I thank him again, pin the brooch on my shirt and race up Grey Street.





25 Butterflies

Matthew Condon

In late September 1962, when the first Warana Writers Convention was held as part of the Warana Festival in Brisbane, my grandfather George Baker was dying in a seaside shack in Scarborough on the Redcliffe Peninsula.

George would have had no thought for a gaggle of writers getting together in Brisbane to discuss books. He was a man who did things with his hands – fixed the neighbour's clothes iron, repaired cars, invented things like the first fibreglass motorcycle helmet, which he dubbed the Skid Lid.

He couldn't have imagined that his grandson – I was seven months old when he passed away – would base his first novel on him, and that *The Motorcycle Cafe* would trigger many invitations to what would become the Brisbane Writers Festival.

This was my home festival, and there was no greater honour than to feature as a writer on the BWF program. You had been humbly invited into that overwhelming jacaranda shadow of such greats as Thea Astley, David Malouf and so many others.

And, like any festival, when richly complicated and diverse people are brought together for a few days to celebrate books and writing, anything can happen.

I remember interviewing on stage the Brazilian mega-selling spiritual novelist and guru Paulo Coelho. Things went swimmingly. For the first few minutes. Then a butterfly drifted in through the open windows facing the Brisbane River and fluttered recklessly above the heads of the enormous crowd.

Paulo stopped, his eyes wide, his hands held up, palms out, as if to say – stop. And he pointed out the butterfly. Then entered a personal, uninterrupted monologue that squeezed every last cubic ounce of helium out of the balloon that was that hour-long session.

The lucky butterfly made it out. I did not.

There were innumerable sessions with egos great and small, drunken shenanigans in the way only writers can shenanigan, drunkenly, and moments that moved you and left you in tears, all in beautiful Brisbane, the place I loved (and continue to do so) more than anywhere in the world.

But my festival appearances had one magnificent constant. They had this entirely unexpected rock, this pillar, this enduring presence.

His name was David.

He was quite elderly the first time he attended one of my events at the festival, and he waited patiently for me to sign a copy of my latest book.

David had a very open and honest face. He was tall, a little stooped, and dressed as you might for an afternoon of gardening in the backyard. And he wore a floppy canvas hat.

He had a slight stutter, so you had to draw in close to hear him. But he knew my work well, and offered insightful opinions and genuine thanks for the books.

At my next Brisbane festival appearance, there he was again. Dressed in baggy pea-green trousers and a checked flannelette shirt, and that floppy hat. Of course I remembered him. He smiled. We shook hands and had a great chat.

Then, the third time I was invited back to the BWF, some years later, I was hopeful he'd be there again. I wanted to see how he'd been going. What he'd been up to.

I was beginning to worry. By my final session I hadn't caught sight of him, but halfway through that panel discussion I saw his placid face near the back of the audience. Loyal, reliable David.

The last time I attended the festival he was, of course, there in the line with my latest book. I stood and gave him a half-hug, and he beamed. He was frail. He had conspicuously aged. Time had marched on for both of us.

Now, every time I think of the Brisbane Writers Festival, I think of David. I see his kind face. I remember his insistence that he didn't want to be a bother and take up too much of my time. He carried the books he'd bought at the festival in a used plastic shopping bag.

I seem to remember the last time I saw him he had a bus to catch home. And I stood and watched him walk away, and thought - yes, David, we all have a bus to catch in the end.

He was my reader. He was an unpretentious, shy man who had lived his whole life in Brisbane, and to this day I think of him when I write and wonder if David will like my new work.

I am not a person who believes in spectres and futures written in lines on palms, in crystal balls or decks of cards that can predict your fate, or astrology.

But only in recent years, as I too have grown older, have I thought about David, this loyal and kindly person I felt I had known my whole life, and wondered if he wasn't the living spirit of my grandfather, George Baker, who died in that seaside shack all those years ago not long after the birth of the festival, who came to check in on me now and again, and say hello.

David, my most important reader, who flitted into each festival like a butterfly, engaged with me, however briefly, and then was gone.

26Carnival Maxine Beneba Clarke

September 2014

The Brisbane Writers Festival has called this sold-out event at the Brisbane Powerhouse "Literary Vaudeville". Among other delights, acclaimed American novelist Dave Eggers is reading a series of letters sent to the chief executives of twenty Fortune 500 companies, written from the point of view of a dog named Steven. Munanjali poet Samuel Wagan Watson, whose work I've long admired, is "cooking" a book on stage, teasing out all the ingredients for a great read. For my part, I slam some poetry. After the event, we sit behind the book-signing table in the foyer and chat with the exiting

crowd. My book's only been out for a month or so. I don't think anyone here even really knows who I am. I nervously watch the other writers signing lines. I feel a bit like an imposter - a feeling I now realise never quite goes away. The air is thick with stories, and possibility. It's my first time in Meanjin, and only my second major writers festival - but it really feels like the start of a journey.

September 2016

One balmy festival evening, in the foyer of the writer's hotel, I come face to face with Yasmin Abdel-Magied. We've heard of each other, in that through-the-grapevine, internet-connected, writers-of-colour way. But this is the first time we've met in person. She starts to talk, as I start to talk, as she starts to talk, as I start to talk. And eventually, we start laughing. We introduce ourselves and spontaneously share a cuppa at the nearby cafe, talking about nothing in particular and everything all at once. It's the first time I've met another Australian author of African descent on the festival trail, though Yasmin's Africa is Sudan, the country of her birth, and mine is the west side of the continent hundreds of years ago. Progress is coming - we can both feel it. Change is afoot in Australian literature.

It's wild now, thinking of the reckoning that was about to come: a sombrero-laden circus of an opening-night address that would prompt walkouts, criticism and worldwide debate.

In that moment, though, we were just two proud African diaspora Australian women, finally on the festival bill, chatting unreservedly about storytelling on the beautiful lands of the Turrbul and Yuggera people.

September 2019

A section of the State Library has been sequestered for the hour. A local organisation has provided a bin full of reclaimed items: discarded taffeta, cardboard tubes and offcuts, coloured wool, tin foil. I read my new picture book, *Fashionista*, then we get started: making bow ties, fascinators and jewellery. The group ranges in age from four to about seventy-five. One woman is here with both her father and her daughter. He's reluctant at first, then tentatively begins making an ostentatious black crepe-paper scarf.

"Make sure your fashion items tell your story," I instruct, wandering the room to chat with the crafters.

One woman has used only paper and wood materials, to tell the tale of the destruction of trees near her home. One teenage girl has made a rainbow fascinator, which she firmly straps onto her head "because I haven't always been proud of who I am".

At the conclusion of our making, we strut, one by one, across a room filled with joy.

It's moments like these that have come to define this carnival of creatives for me - moments of surprise, pride, connection, abandon, absurdity, solidarity and questioning.

Long live carnival - let the festival begin.

Warana Writers Week, 1987

Laurie Muller

You shouldn't talk about trains to Thea Astley, as she loves them. She was a Warana Writers Week guest in 1987, the year Mike Ahern unseated Joh Bjelke-Petersen as premier and he hosted a big evening dinner for the Warana Festival on the Speakers Green at Parliament House. In the dinner's aftermath Thea and I were having a good chat about train travel in western Queensland, where she had taught in her earlier years. Charleville had recently experienced a devastating flood and Thea reckoned it would be a great idea to take a trainload of writers out there to cheer them up. We were both having a great laugh about "Murder on the Charleville Express", as she named the idea, when Ahern walked past and asked what we were laughing about. Thea promptly said that I was seeking a train from his government to take writers out west to cheer up Charleville. Premier Ahern agreed it was a great idea and told me to get a proposal on his desk by next morning. I put a three-paragraph proposal on paper and faxed it through the next day, thinking that was the end of that. To my amazement he replied advising it was approved. So, Thea and her laughter are responsible for the extraordinary Writers Train of 1990 carrying the likes of Thea Astley, Tom Keneally, Rosie Scott, Tim Winton, Janette Turner-Hospital, Rodney Hall and more, along with a *60 Minutes* crew, to Charleville and back.

27 Artists and the Book

Noreen Grahame*

Well, what do we have here? First artists' books fair held in Australia, 24-25 September 1994.

Subtitled "Beware Books by Artists", the two-day fair was hosted by the State Library of Queensland and included in the 1994 Warana Writers Week program.

Alongside a smattering of international exhibits there were hundreds of Australian entries by individual artists and from university printmaking departments. Set out on trestle tables, each carried a descriptive label.

Well, what are artists' books?

The first use of the term "artists books" originated from the 1973 exhibition of "books made by artists" at the Moore College of Art in Philadelphia. The term was cast adrift sans apostrophe. The question of with or without apostrophe seems to have added to the controversy in some circles about this genre of art and the book.

Artists' books are challenging and subversive but manage to escape the paparazzi. They are not exactly underground but it's unlikely that your favourite bookshop has heard of them or that they can be found on library shelves. They do, however, proliferate in special collections such as the artists' books collection held at the State Library of Queensland.

"Well, what do we have here? Well, what are artists' books?"

Upset that our exhibits were called books, one participant at the Writers Week lectures fired these questions at me.

I offered to take him around. The first book we came to was an "altered book". The artist had taken a book, hammered nails through it from cover to cover, so that it could not be opened. I'm sure his blood pressure shot up. But there were also visual books, concrete poetry books, as well as more elaborate constructions. He was far from convinced.

Later in the day, though, I spied him again. Was he playing truant from the writers' talks? He was back on the second day, engaged again with the "books". I went over and asked him what he thought. He reluctantly said that they were interesting but ...

Changing tactics I explained that in the social and political climate of the 1960s and the early 1970s artists' ideas had become important. It is said that artists were dissatisfied with the gallery system, they wished to democratise art and, just as William Blake had done, they set about bypassing the existing distribution system. The book became the most appropriate vehicle for artists to record and disseminate their ideas as works of art. The self-published artist's book entered the scene. American artist Ed Ruscha self-published his artist's books and even envisaged that they would be conveniently placed at the supermarket checkout. People might pop down to the supermarket before breakfast to pick up milk and cereal. They could also pick up one of his artist's books to enjoy over breakfast.

Was our truant won over? I'm not so sure but artists' books have certainly won over the art world, artists and collections, and captured a following to boot.

* graham galleries + editions

28 On with the Geek Show Oliver Phommavanh

The Brisbane Writers Festival will always hold a place in my heart. It was my very first writers festival as a children's author. In 2010, just three months after my debut novel, *Thai-riffic!* was published, I flew to Brisbane and stayed in a nearby apartment hotel near the State Library of Queensland. I was thinking, wowee, I've finally made it as a writer!

This child-like excitement carried through my debut at the BWF schools program, Word Play. Word Play pretty much sums up how I approached my sessions. I wrote words in a book for kids to enjoy, but I revelled in the "play" element, throwing plush toys at the audience, threatening kids with a light sabre and a Halloween mask, and getting kids to follow me to the signing table, running across the ground floor of the State Library, much to the bemused looks of festival staff. It was more than just making kids realise that children's authors were fun; it was telling them that they had the power to make stories and books fun. Word Play captured this essence with a mix of eccentric writers from across Australia. Maybe it was the glorious spring weather but everyone had a relaxed "Sunshine State" of mind here. We were here to play. It never felt like work.

My second appearance at BWF came just three years later, now as an established children's author, and it gave me my first chance to be my other persona, a proud Asian-Australian writer. If only my parents could have seen me, being on a panel with two other Asian writers, one of my idols, Benjamin Law, and international author Kevin Kwan, who wrote a little thing called *Crazy Rich Asians*. There's a photo of us, arms locked, looking quite chuffed after our session. It's a career highlight that still makes me smile.

I got to reunite with Benjamin Law again at my most recent appearance at BWF, in 2019, where I got my geek on, appearing on ABC Radio's *Stop Everything* show, co-hosted by Benjamin and Beverly Wang. I covered all of my nerdy passions, from Pokemon to 1990s boy bands and sneakers. Later that week, I got to do my other occasional job, standup comedian, where I featured on a fun Agony Aunt session where we solved relationship problems from the audience. It was nice making adults laugh for a change.

I'd like to thank BWF for taking a chance on me, way back then. As I hit my second decade of being a children's author, with a swag of fresh, exciting stories in the pipeline, I hope to return to the festival, ready to inspire a new generation of readers. I'm a little too old to be running around, so I hope the festival staff don't mind me buzzing around the library on my new e-scooter.

29 BWF Baby Trent Jamieson

Look, if your baby is to be born, it might as well happen on the night of the Brisbane Writers Festival after watching a panel about death.

You've also been on another panel talking about your own book, which you are still not a hundred per cent sure is coming out, because of Covid. And you really weren't that buzzed to be talking about it, because you felt like a fraud - it had been an embarrassingly long time between novels.

You kind of didn't want to go at all, but your partner, whose due date was two days before, and who is over everything, and has her parents staying, insisted.

So you go, and you talk about the book. And it's fun, and you get to chat to the excellent Lisa Fuller, whose novel *Ghost Bird* is amazing, and you still feel like a bit of a fraud, because who knows if your novel will come out? But at least you can talk about it.

And then you catch up for a second with a few friends. Krissy Kneen, Kathleen Jennings, and we're in the middle of Covid 2021, and it feels like maybe it's going to get better (though, yeah, it doesn't). No one's wearing masks, and someone hugged you - which, honestly, you're not that keen on, but it always takes you by surprise - and then your agent says come along to this Death Meditation, and you think, why not?

Well.

Well.

Well.

Maybe that's not the best thing to see just then. There's a life kindling in your partner's belly, getting ready to flare, but, even now, even at the gate, things can sputter, and fail, and there had been two failures recently, and you were, to be honest, terrified. Sometimes it's better not to think about it. Anyway. Too late now.

The lights dim.

You've never been all that good at meditation.

And today isn't a great day to start.

You're checking your phone.

You're checking your phone.

Just in case you need to race away. Not so focused on the dying, or the losing, or the acceptance, more on: is it going to happen? Is this birth going to happen? Is it going to happen while I am in the middle of this meditation?

Then the meditation's done.

No texts.

Other than, *I'm good. I'm good. Stop texting me. I'll let you know.*

So, dinner. Talk of books and movies and Kathleen's travel tales, which are the best, because she is kind and observant and talks about the world in the richest sense. And dinner's taking a while. It's a Saturday, it's busy, this place is great.

But it's taking forever.

Nothing on your phone.

You're so hungry.

The food arrives.

You better come home now.No rush.

(RUSH)

You may have eaten the burger.

Then you're running out of there. Probably a false alarm.

Run into your old mate and work colleague Benjamin Law. "I'm having a baby!"

Odd sort of greeting, and it's not you *having* the baby, but you're kind of flustered, and then you're running, getting home. (You caught a bus, not the fastest way, but the busway's there, and it takes maybe fifteen minutes, so maybe it is, you don't know, it made sense at the time.)

Contractions. Hand squeezing.

Belting to hospital. Drop-offs, bags. Your first child, two and half years before (back before Covid, back before the fires, back when you could pretend that the world wasn't heading into rougher times and rougher climes) had been slow then quick at the end.

You remember that first birth,a cast of thousands,rushing in,telling you to prepare for cold and still,and you got loud and bloody,and glorious.

This one is fast, fast, fast.

Just after midnight. Just heading into Mother's Day, you're holding a baby in your arms and breathing them deep, and rocking them (up down up down, slow, slow, slow) in that way that's habitual once you have a child, and it is the greatest thing ever.

It still is. They still are.

That was your BWF. Didn't see that many panels, meditated poorly, ate a fine burger, maybe. But you'll never forget it. You'll never forget that. Holding your child, breathing them in.

(And the damn book came out the next year, so there.)

30A Diamond Not in the Least in the Rough Sallyanne Atkinson

BWF ...an acronym, appropriately contemporary, for the Brisbane Writers Festival on its sixty-year journey and having evolved from its former titles of Brisbane Writers Week and Brisbane Writers Weekend. Those iterations were part of the Warana Festival, launched in 1961 (and the first Warana Writers Convention in 1962). I remember it well as a cadet journalist on the former Brisbane *Telegraph*, also part of Brisbane's past. The name was the result of a *Courier-Mail* competition and there was some debate about the meaning of Warana, which was supposed to be an Aboriginal word meaning blue skies. But did it? Now that's a discussion for another day.

I became chair of the Brisbane Writers Festival in the early noughties. Warana had become the Brisbane Festival in 1996, when the Writers Festival also came of age as its very own festival with its very own board. Matt Foley was the enthusiastic minister for the arts and a great supporter. He was a passionate lover of poetry and much given to reciting it, and it's to him we owe the Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize, named for the Ipswich poet.

The festival was a celebration of writing and, most importantly, reading. It took place each September on the banks of the Brisbane River, at first on the lawn between the Art Gallery and the State Library and then on the grass in front of QPAC, when the library was being rebuilt. It happened in tents and you could wander in and out, partaking of a smorgasbord of speakers and discussions. It was relaxed and informal and open to all views - we always believed that one of the purposes of a writers festival was to encourage and stimulate discussion and free speech, traditionally what writers have always been about. And I don't remember anyone being offended by what was said in any of the sessions - and there were some fiery ones. And we didn't charge people to attend.

I have lots of happy memories of those five years. Kingfisher Bay on Fraser Island was one of our sponsors and one year I took a group of visiting writers for a pre-festival break at the resort, giving them a Queensland experience and helping them get over jetlag. Michelle de Kretser (who had actually only come from Melbourne) had recently released her first book, *The Rose Grower*, and she was overawed at being there with a group that included Patrick McGrath and Peter Carey. But she was to become one of Australia's leading novelists.

Li Cunxin was an accidental speaker the year he released his first book, *Mao's Last Dancer*. I was then on the board of the Australian Ballet, for which he was first a dancer and then a board member. He came to Brisbane to speak at a function for the Liberal MP for Ryan, Michael Johnson. After I'd heard him and his wonderful story we managed to slot him into the program. The session was about memoir and one of the others on the panel was local writer Hugh Lunn. Li was the hit of that year's festival, and the rest, as they say, is history.

31 A Political Stage

Paul Barclay

Congratulations to the Brisbane Writers Festival on its sixtieth birthday. What an amazing feat. As a festival participant over very many years, there have been so many personal highlights for me – almost all of which were recorded for my ABC radio programs.

I have spoken with some of the world's best (and most controversial) novelists – Phillip Meyer and Lionel Shriver spring to mind.

I recall a memorable conversation with American writer Joe Bageant – sadly no longer with us – author of *Deer Hunting with Jesus*, whose writing in many ways presaged, many years beforehand, the ascendancy of Trump to the White House, without ever mentioning him, specifically.

I have talked with a former Israeli spy, musicians, blockbuster authors, politicians and activists. I remember moderating panel conversations about drug addiction, pornography and censorship, the rise of hate crimes in the US, how to achieve peace in the Middle East, and how to respond to the global financial crisis.

I am sure there is much I have forgotten over the many years I have worked with the festival. But, as you can tell from those experiences I have remembered, the festival has been at the forefront of advancing debate and discussion about important issues, as well as providing a critical platform for great writers.

May it continue for another sixty years – at least.

32 Making Connections in the Red Box

Sally Piper

I'm in the Red Box. A two-storey cube with tiered seating and floor-to-ceiling glass. Through it I look across the waters of Maiwar, through ribbons of busy motorway, to Meanjin's main commercial and retail hub – the CBD – on the riverbank on the other side.

I am on the cultural side: the side of ideas and art. Each is located on its own finger of land caught in a pinch of the wide brown river. Water separates the two ambitions – commercial and cultural – but the ferries, with their frothy wakes, and Kurilpa and Victoria bridges provide connection.

I'm in this cube with the glorious view for the Brisbane Writers Festival. No specific year; it could be any number since I first attended in 2005. In this space I've listened to poets, novelists, memoirists and nonfiction writers. It's perfect for readings: small, intimate and with good acoustics.

The session starts: *I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land...*

I settle in, ready for the stories, from the very first to the new, that ferry and bridge connection too.

Warana Writers Week, 1988

Laurie Muller

The high drama surrounding the Fitzgerald Inquiry and the impending demise of the then premier, Johannes Bjelke-Petersen, was the subject of a panel discussion during Warana Writers Week 1988, featuring historian Ross Fitzgerald, political scientist Peter Coaldrake, biographer Hugh Lunn, ABC journalist Quentin Dempster and *Courier-Mail* investigative reporter Phil Dickie. There was a huge audience with all seats taken in the auditorium, including the balcony and side aisles, and the tension and outpouring of opinions was intense. In the middle of the hubbub, comedian Gerry Connolly, a lifelike Joh impersonator, came stomping down the centre aisle with his Joh hat clamped on, demanding in his roaring Joh voice equal representation on the panel. There was nearly a riot as the audience at first thought it was Joh, and the panellists, initially frozen with shock, entered the fray and a shouting debate began with "Joh".



Thea Astley, 1925–2004

33A Memory Slideshow Bob Johnson

To remember being at Brisbane Writers Festivals over the past forty years or so is like going through a box of old colour slides dragged from the bottom of a desk drawer. These memory slides, like any old slides, are sometimes out of order. And, like real slides, many memory slides are faded, and faces and places often indistinct. Faded also are much of the memories of the words of wisdom and inspiration from all the writers who took to the stage. But still strong are the feelings of excitement and privilege of being in the presence of writers of local, national and international renown. Let's look, randomly, at some of my memory slides.

The first two slides involve the doyen of Australian playwrights, David Williamson.

Slide 1. Early 1990s. The laconic Williamson is on stage in the State Library of Queensland riverside auditorium, reminiscing on his long and prolific career. He reels off anecdote after anecdote about how one or another of his plays and screenplays was written, produced and received by the critics and by his audiences.

Slide 2. After Williamson's session, he is at a gathering where his biography, written by his wife, Kristin, is launched. Also at the launch is Frank Hardy, the old leftie writer and one-time Communist Party of Australia stalwart who wrote *Power Without Glory*. My memory is of meeting and chatting with both Williamson and Hardy, a threesome of the very tall and lanky playwright, the stocky, pipe-smoking Hardy and this average-height journalist. Hardy had just released a book of his stories and he inscribed my copy, "There is a curse on a city that has only one newspaper". This was not long after the closure of the *Telegraph* and the *Sunday Sun*, leaving Brisbane with only one daily newspaper.

Slide 3. Mid-1980s. Four-times Miles Franklin award winner Thea Astley, cigarette in hand, is on stage talking of her writing life and her books, which included *The Well Dressed Explorer*, *It's Raining in Mango* and *Drylands*. Astley was Brisbane born and raised, but lived most of her life in Sydney and later Kuranda in north Queensland.

Slide 4. 2015. Thea Astley again, but by now she had died. A biography of the writer by Karen Lamb is just out, called *Thea Astley: Inventing Her Own Weather*. Lamb is talking about her journey in Astley's footsteps from childhood home in Ashgrove, schooling at All Hallows' in Fortitude Valley, marriage and life in Sydney, Kuranda and Nowra, through to her death on the Gold Coast in 2004.

Slide 5. Most festivals have been, and continue to be, centred on the Queensland Cultural Centre, particularly the State Library, and use of auditoriums at the Queensland Art Gallery, the Gallery of Modern Art and the Queensland Museum. In the late 1990s, some sessions of the festival are held in tents in open spaces of the Cultural Centre. In one of these tents is a trio of writers, each a significant personality: Bob Ellis, Ross Fitzgerald and George Negus. Ellis, the Sydney-based left-wing writer, filmmaker, political commentator and curmudgeon, is wearing a top coat and scarf (on a hot day). Fitzgerald, the academic and historian is dressed for the heat, including his signature white Panama hat. Negus, TV reporter and presenter visiting his home city, could be mistaken for a stock and station agent in check shirt, brown trousers and

R.M. Williams leather belt and elastic-sided boots. The three discuss, with humour and profundity and often good-natured disagreement, issues across the full spectrum of Australian life, literature and politics. At question-time discussion turns to self-publishing and a young man at the back of the audience stands up, waves a paperback book and tells how he self-published and self-promoted his first novel. The book is a thriller called *Contest* and the young man is Matthew Reilly.

Slide 6. Late 1980s. In the small theatre off the Water Mall of the Queensland Art Gallery are two of Queensland's best known writers: novelist and poet David Malouf, author of the Brisbane-centric novel *Johnno*, and Oodgeroo Noonuccal, poet, artist and lifelong Indigenous rights campaigner. They each talk of their writing life and Oodgeroo (formerly known as Kath Walker) reads some of her poetry, including *We Are Going*, a plaintive cry for the lot of Indigenous people.

Slide 7. Early 1990s. The English-born Western Australian writer Elizabeth Jolley is on stage in the State Library auditorium. The author of fifteen novels, four collections of short stories and three nonfiction books is in her seventies and feisty about good writing and publishing. In question time a woman in the audience makes a pompous comment that includes the word "carapace". Jolley begins her answer: "I expect you mean *shell* ..."

Slide 8. Another, smaller lecture theatre, late 1990s. Two men on the dais. One is Peter Corris, creator of the hard-nosed Sydney private detective Cliff Hardy. Corris, an academic, historian and journalist, as well as a crime-fiction writer, talks at length about the serious side of his writing life. The other man, whose name is not recalled, tells of his own almost-accidental writing career. He describes how in the late 1940s after wartime army service he was in Sydney out of uniform and out of a job when he found work writing American western stories for a Sydney publisher. These stories, set in the American wild west but written and sold in Australia, were printed on cheap paper as 96-page novellas with bright artwork paper covers and titles like *My Gun Is My Jury* and *No Prize for Glory*. The pay for the writers was about four times the average wage but the publisher held the copyright.

So that's a "memory slideshow" of some of my experiences of the Brisbane Writers Festival most years from the late 1970s to the present. As well as the above writers, the annual festivals have presented successful local writers of all literary kinds, including Nick Earls (*Zigzag Street*), Hugh Lunn (*Over the Top with Jim*), Matthew Condon (*Three Crooked Kings; Jacks and Jokers; All Fall Down*), Kristina Olsson (*Shell; Boy, Lost*), Herb Wharton (*Unbranded; Yumba Days*), Venero Armano (*Romeo of the Underworld; The Crying Forest*), Andrew McGahan (*Last Drinks; The White Earth*), Jackie Huggins (*Auntie Rita*) ... and many more.

Warana Writers Week, 1987

Laurie Muller

Thea Astley, who won the inaugural Steele Rudd Award in 1987 with *It's Raining in Mango*, was an honoured guest at Warana Writers Week. What quickly became evident was Thea's wicked sense of humour and cackling laugh as she regaled her rapt audience with tales from north Queensland later found in *It's Raining in Mango* and *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*. Her Steele Rudd Award included a beautiful sandstone book carved by Rhyl Hinwood, the distinguished sculptor and Churchill Fellow. Thea reckoned she nearly got a hernia lugging it to the airport on her way home to Nowra in New South Wales.

34A Volunteer's Perspective

Thomas B. Nelson

I have been a volunteer with the Brisbane Writers Festival since 2011. What I saw and experienced, in particular the schools program, in that first year as a volunteer inspired me to become more actively involved. I usually work the whole five days at The Edge venue. The enthusiasm and excitement of the students is a true marvel. On entering the auditorium the excitement is bubbling quietly underneath; however, when they come out they are animated and genuinely excited. Inside, the students actively participate in the sessions and the student chairs who introduce the authors, illustrators and writers are truly inspiring with their confidence and speaking ability. The noise during some of these sessions is something to be experienced. Later, at the book-signing tables, hundreds of students stand patiently in line (*reading*) waiting to get their favourite book signed.

I witnessed John Marsden hold 250 Year 9 and 10 students spellbound, armed only with a handheld microphone. The audience members were very engrossed in his story of language, writing and human interaction. Some of the children's authors sessions are like rock festivals, the energy and noise shaking the venue.

The themes of the main festival each year have something for everybody - exposing the dark underbelly of Queensland politics; murder, mayhem and mystery from crime writers; stories of personal growth and overcoming adversity - all is covered at the BWF. The festival has experienced walkouts and controversy over the years and has overcome them and grown in stature.

All voices are heard at the festival - First Nations, immigrant, local, overseas and Australian, poets and young writers tell their stories to enthusiastic and informed audiences.

I have seen volunteers have their books published after attending a masterclass or session with an editor. Others have graduated to presenter status with the festival.

In my view the BWF exposes people to ideas, inspiration and ingenuity, and the exposure of the young to these ideals can only enhance our cultural development. I am proud to be a part of this wonderful BWF community.

35Golden Opportunities, 2019

Rosalie Ham

It was a few years ago but I remember the taxi driver offered two choices - a drive through a tunnel or above ground. I chose the sunny route to the hotel. There were more choices regarding the route to the festival venue but I found the walk beneath the whale skeleton most pleasing. Everyone seemed to proceed at about two to three heartbeats slower than the rest of the world but everything ran like clockwork and everyone was on time, and smiling.

My excellent discussion with Frances Whiting took place in a well-peopled auditorium and the session on the verandah overlooking the river (River Decks) was masterful - smaller audience (close enough to hear), picturesque setting with a breeze to temper the warmth, lunch and Champagne served. It was almost better than the whale. There was also a drive through Brisbane to a library talk, something I love to do.

The evenings were balmy so I joined other writers, some also from Melbourne, for after-festival activities, and I have to say they seemed a little more unstitched, amused and amusing. I recall an endless outdoor restaurant that served many different cuisines and provided plenty of seating. The close proximity of this venue - and chilled drinks - to my hotel room made socialising better than usual. And it was quiet - no thumping music, no nearby road, screaming engines or airbrakes, no trams.

This was all very refreshing but, best of all, my readership had reached further north than it ever had and so did my presence. As a result of the Brisbane Writers Festival, more amiable festivals in warm climes came my way. Kind of golden, really.

36 An Elegy to Audiences

Julie Beveridge

Between 2013 and 2016, when I was privileged enough to deliver four festivals for BWF, we were fortunate to be able to boast audience numbers of more than 30,000 over the five-day event.

BWF has a long history of return audiences, a dedicated heartland of readers, thinkers and imaginers who bring the festival to life each year. I'd like to let you know about one of them.

A couple of weeks after starting at BWF in 2013 I got a call from this old guy called John.

"Julie, what have you got for me?" he said.

And this was the beginning of my relationship with John Wakely, a return attendee since – he would have me boast for him – the very first Warana Writers Convention in 1962.

By my last year at the festival, in 2016, John would tell me he nearly had a clean run – except for one year in the 1980s when he was laid up in hospital with a dicky heart.

John was a committed but non-monogenous audience member, a stalwart of several festivals beyond BWF. I think his attendance at BWF is only paralleled by his commitment to the Woodford Folk Festival. He'd show up each year with a full schedule and, by the time I met him, he had some special needs to get around. We'd pick him up, provide a wheelchair and a team of volunteers to hang out with him and make sure he got to every event he wanted to go to. He truly took part in and valued the experience.

John was a curious, kind and generous man. He loved poetry, politics, being read to and reading to people. Since my time at the festival, John and I have remained close. He calls, out of the blue, to read to me, or to ask if I saw this week's Q&A.

"There's a festival event in that right there, Julie," he'd say.

"It's not me anymore John."

"I know," he'd quip, "I've already called them."

We won't be seeing John at this year's BWF; he left us this past December. Generous until the end, his books and body both donated to institutions to nurture future curiosity.

John loved this festival, and it's important that the history books show that we loved him too.

(Julie Beveridge was BWF Program Manager in 2013 and 2014, and its Artistic Director and CEO in 2015 and 2016.)

37 Alexis Wright Outed Me

Steve MinOn

It was in 2017, during the Brisbane Writers Festival, towards the end of my tenure on the festival's board. Alexis Wright was seated one plastic chair away. We were inside the Angel's Palace installation, a Gordon Hookey-designed theatrical tribute to her monumental work *Carpentaria*, which was about to be performed. I was introducing myself and being the very model of a modern minor board member. That was when she outed me.

Forget the marketing skills that I was lending the board, courtesy of a twenty-five-year career in advertising. Forget that I'd run multiple businesses and was adept at scrutinising company accounts. Forget that I had chased funding from government for years, so I knew about the intricacies of corporate governance and pitching.

Alexis Wright could sense, beyond all of that, that I was hiding the real reason I was there.

She leaned in like she was pulling a blanket over our heads, like we were huddling in secrecy, friends exchanging confidences. The great writer and me in intimate conversation. Charming. Disarming. And then the laying on of literary hands.

"So, Steve," she said, nailing me to a cross, "are you a writer?"

How had she seen it, this hidden dream I'd harboured, caked by layers of digression, imposter syndrome and fear? I was hibernating in a cave of life's excuses and, somehow, she had tunnelled through all of that and now there was no more lying to be done. Wright was right, it was time to commit.

"Actually, Alexis, I am *trying* to be a writer."

"We're all *trying* to be writers, Steve," she said. And then she sat back in her chair, smiling, satisfied, as if her job there was done. Me? I was mortified. I had just admitted to the venerable Alexis Wright that I was a writer. I'd said the fateful words to her that I hadn't yet said to myself. *I am ... a writer*. Shit! Shit! Shit!

PS

In 2021 I completed my debut novel, *I Am if UR*, and it was shortlisted by the Queensland Writers Centre Publishable program for emerging writers.



38 Belonging Melanie Saward

The first time I went to the Brisbane Writers Festival I was in high school. I'd just moved to Brisbane from lutruwita (Tasmania) and was having a hard time finding things to like about the big city we'd moved to. But the excursion to BWF, where I heard John Marsden and James Moloney – authors whose books I'd devoured in the school library back home in Launceston – speak about their writing and actually answer my questions, was the first time I realised there were good things about moving to a mainland capital city.

As an undergrad, BWF became a place where I got to spend days dipping in and out of sessions, some where I'd line up with stacks of books to be signed and others where I'd slip into a session with writers unknown to me at the time who became firm favourites. One of my most treasured BWF memories is of meeting Chinese Canadian memoirist Wayson Choy, who passed on important lessons about writing craft and taught me that failure was a wonderful opportunity to continue to learn as a writer. On the last day of that festival, he gifted me an origami butterfly and pressed his business card into my hand, making me promise to contact him when my book was published. Sadly, Wayson passed in 2019 and my debut novel will be published in 2023.

Attending BWF as a university student was an extension of that feeling I'd had at my first festival as a high school student: finding that there was a place where I could listen to people speaking about books, ideas and writing craft, and that it was exactly where I belonged in the world. As a kid who came from a lower socio-economic background, I didn't always feel like I belonged at university or in some of the festival spaces, but in sessions with authors like Melissa Lucashenko, Larissa Behrendt and Tony Birch there was a real sense of pride and belonging. Having the chance to listen to other Blakfullas with similar experiences speak at BWF gave me the space to explore books beyond the largely white literary canon I'd been taught at school (and was being taught at university for that matter), where I really felt like my voice and my stories belonged.

In later years I had the chance to volunteer in the BWF office in the lead-up to the festival. Volunteering was amazing. It gave me a real sense of pride to play a small role in putting the program and the festival together.

My relationship with BWF has developed across my life and career, and these days I'm pleased to still be a part of the behind-the-scenes development of the festival as a member of the First Nations Advisory Council. This is a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who work with BWF staff and board on developing the festival. In recent years, I've also stepped across from being an audience member to the stage and had the chance to chair several sessions, including one with Larissa Behrendt, one of my favourite authors.

As my own books hit the shelves in the next few years, I hope to see my relationship with BWF continue to grow (I absolutely cannot wait to sit at a signing table in the Knowledge Walk one day, hopefully soon) and I'm looking forward to seeing how the festival develops in the future.

It took me a long time to think of Queensland as home, but every year when I step into the State Library at festival time, I think about that first trip to BWF and how far I've come, and I know where I belong.

39 The Last Word 2021 Ellen van Neerven

Jingeri –

I acknowledge the Yuggera and Turrbul people as the Traditional Owners of this land and that this always was and always will be Yuggera and Turrbul land.

My hands were cold this morning when I sat down to write. I have never been very good at handling the cold. When I opened up the blinds there was dew on the grass and I turned on one of my favourite singers: Laura Mvula.

And I thought about the discussion I had with Alex McCallum about the sky we see on the Terrace on Friday afternoon, after I delivered the First Word.

I had decided there that I would write the Last Word during the festival, which has so quickly come to an end.

I wrote this in the early hours of this morning and in fragments during the day, so I feel like it is a tangled blanket, an outpour of my feelings and observations, fragments of clarity and a weaving of words.

As a poet – I'm a sensitive fragile soul – but that's where I want to be.

Key words that I have heard at the festival are *silence* and *voice*.

I have been involved in facilitating the Inala Elders Poetry Circle for the last twelve months as part of the Knowledge Keepers program. Through this project I have learned the importance of telling your own story and having a platform for it to be heard.

When I first started at Inala Wangarra, most of the Elders didn't know me from a bar of soap.

Aunty Lyn told me later – I didn't know that a young person like yourself would get our experiences or take the time to listen to us.

That's fair. We live in a society that often neglects our older voices. This is not "Our Way". Not "The Way". Our Elders are the core and heart of this world we live in. Their lessons and intergenerational relationships sustain us. They are our living libraries.

Our society has taken so much from them and they have seen so much. Many of the women in the group had been living with complex trauma. They grew up in eras of harm and exclusion, and unfortunately many of these traumas have not been resolved and cannot be resolved in the society we live in today, which is unequal and unjust.

When I arrived in Inala my approach was to come in gently into the space and to let the Elders lead. It was them who created and maintained, like a fire that needs to be stoked, the Poetry Circle. A circular space for poetry writing and sharing.

They brought this space so much energy and enthusiasm and love, and, like I said, it was them who led the direction of the project, though with the addition of me gently laying down some ground rules. They were:

- At some point we need to stop yacking and start writing.
- We always start with automatic writing to cleanse our souls.
- We have writing prompts but if you don't like the prompt you can do something different.
- The group is not a competition and you must try hard not to compare yourself to others.

- The quantity of the words will not be judged.
- There is no obligation to read but always nice when we do get to hear the words out loud.
- If the words are too emotional to say we will shoulder the burden together.
- We will yarn for an hour, write for an hour and then eat and yarn for an hour.

And then the unspoken rule:

- Every week we become closer.

It didn't happen overnight but our walls came down. It was a space for us to just be ourselves.

The amazing women weaved their life stories into short poems. Sometimes funny and witty, sometimes lyrical, sometimes devastating but beautiful – it was an honour to be a witness to this narrative justice.

I learned even more when we started the editing process.

“I noticed your poem has two titles,” I said to Aunty Lyn.

“Yes, it does have two titles,” she said back.

“Okay?”

“Yes, the title is ‘Where Do I Belong/How Can I Belong’ – that’s the title.”

Okay. Both. I got it.

A beautiful tactile strength of the project is the beauty of the handwriting of the Elders and the sacred process from handwriting to typed text – and the final product where we will include weavings of the handwriting in the book.

The Elders read their poetry for the first time this afternoon in a beautiful gathering in kuril dhagun among family and friends. We are looking forward to bringing the readings back to Inala and also taking it to further places.

It would really make a difference if every publisher in Australia dedicated resources for our Elders and our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledges.

Too many First Nations people have passed away without the opportunity for their story to be told.

Unfortunately, and very sadly, many of our people died in tragic circumstances. Our ancestors were murdered in waterholes, beaches and along the battlefields of this Country and so was our Country. Murder and theft. The origins of the non-Indigenous invaders here on this Country.

Over centuries their colonial project was to erase and eradicate, and we look at the high numbers of our people incarcerated and the high numbers of deaths in custody, and the blatant cruel destruction of Dja Wurrung birthing trees and Juukan Gorge and our rivers and forests and the planned Adani coal mine on Wangan and Jagalingou land.

We can honestly ask ourselves, “Are these white supremacist policies still continuing under other names?”

Sometimes I’m scared to write because when I start writing
at least 476 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people ...

have died in police and prison custody since the royal commission
handed down its final report in 1991.

I have to add to that number.

When I scroll the news every morning I send a prayer to the Ancestors.

There were sadly two more deaths in custody last week

476 people have died.

There’ve been no convictions.

And that royal commission was meant to achieve something. Because of the high rate of deaths in custody in the 1980s. There’s actually been a higher rate of deaths in custody in the following decades. Things are worse.

I don’t know when we will see accountability, let alone justice. So many unthinkable things have happened and keep happening. Every blackfella I know has been affected in some way by a death in custody or most likely more than one. These things happen when we are kids and we have no way of processing it. This is why we must continue to speak out.

Where I hear about silence and voice I think about Lillian, a Cameroonian woman – a recently arrived refugee – on her knees begging then prime minister Scott Morrison to listen to her – to hear about the genocide that is killing members of her family and her community. I see the prime minister’s hands trying to remove her hands off his hands, trying to absolve himself from any responsibility, to remove his hands from any obligation to people, refugees, First Nations people and marginalised groups.

Where I hear about silence and voice I think about Instagram and Twitter deleting posts about the murders of First Nations women on Turtle Island and the expulsion of Palestinians and the mosque attack in Jerusalem. Posts from the ground are censored, limited or shut down altogether.

Where I hear about silence and voice I think about the white supremacist neo-Nazi group of forty men who went on a rampage in Victoria on Invasion Day this year through the sacred Gariwerd, disrespecting sacred Country and threatening First Nations children and Elders with their violent chanting of White Power.

Where I hear about silence and voice I think about trans, gender-diverse and queer people – and how so often our voices are missing when we discuss gendered violence and domestic and family violence – which in itself is a violence.

Transgender people are subjected to high levels of violence, but, due to widespread prejudice, these deaths don’t often receive the justice they would otherwise warrant.

Bhenji Ra, a Filipina trans woman based in Gadigal land in Sydney, recently wrote about the unthinkably tragic death of twenty-five-year-old Filipina trans woman Mhelody Bruno.

How can we call this an equal society, when there is no real justice or accountability when it comes to women living their lives and trans people being murdered?

Where I hear about silence and voice I think about giving Country a voice as Country is our bodies. And we need to give Country a voice more than ever.

Bulgawan.

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p 93 Illustration from *Johnson's Household Book of Nature* by John Karst (detail)

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