

The 2010 Sydney Writers' Festival (*Blue Mountains Program*) reviewed by paul cosgrave

Presented may 16-18 at The Carrington by Varuna The Writers House
Executive Director: Tessa Hockly Program Design: Madeleine Dignam
Moderators: Sara Dowse, Charlotte Wood, Peter Bishop,
Ed Campion, Carol Major, Tegan Bennet Daylight

Both structure and realisation of this festival suggested curation rather than just effective conference design (though it was certainly that) and as a result Monday 17th saw the highest daily attendance ever for the Blue Mountains Program. Each session, complete in itself, seemed also to flow from the previous and into the next so that recurring themes, clearly unplanned, emerged spontaneously. For this, two people in particular should be acknowledged.

Varuna's immediate past executive director, Madeleine Dignam, created the program and returned to see it realised; and her successor, Tessa Hockly, with admirable volunteer support, ensured the event ran smoothly. The moderators, too, were skilful without exception in eliciting information from the authors. Sometimes it was with a perceptive aside, sometimes just a silence.

Sunday May 16

Children's programs are always a delightful opening for a literary festival and Sunday's participants were well rewarded. In three sessions, Kim Gamble & Anna Fienberg, Tristan Bancks and Andy Griffiths showed why young people can be so engaged as an audience and why they must be encouraged to keep turning pages. Every author and illustrator brought something novel and Tristan Bancks, especially, demonstrated an audience rapport that captivated children and parents alike. All were kept enthralled with Golems, rubber ducks, exploding butterflies, dogs on swings, snails and superglue – a smorgasbord for the young imagination. One after another they responded with questions like "How do you start a story?". Among some very good answers, you'll find one from Tristan Bancks at the end of this review. "Buy a 50c exercise book and write down every idea you get", suggested Andy Griffiths.

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Monday May 17

Dr Anne Summers, with Sara Dowse

The Lost Mother

Like Sarah Maddison last year (who attacked the Northern Territory indigenous intervention begun by John Howard's government and continued essentially unchanged by Kevin Rudd's Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin), another left-leaning female writer, Anne Summers, criticised the federal Labour government. She was unequivocal in her condemnation of the reversal of the Schools Child Care policy. "I remember the fanfare from Tania Plibersek about ending the 'double drop-off' at long last", she said, referring to the urban phenomenon of parents leaving young children at remote centres at an early hour, leaving another child at school and feeling as if they've done a week's work by 9.00am. "It was a policy that made sense for all the most sensible reasons and now it's been ditched with no proper explanation. The government says there were enough child care places, which may be true for the well-off but that was never what the argument was about. It was about putting them in the right place. I hate to say this but the Abbott policy is better".

Politics aside, Summers's book *The Lost Mother* is part memoir, part personal renewal and part resurrection. The resurrection concerns the reputation of the fine Australian artist Constance

Stokes, who missed out on the feminist-inspired resurgence that benefited other female artists like Margaret Preston and Grace Cossington-Smith, Summers said. “It’s still very difficult for women in the misogynistic world of Australian art”, she believes, “unless they’re prepared to become notorious for their lives, rather than their art”.

Stokes’s painting of Summers’s mother as a child largely inspired the book and the title refers not only to the painting (missing for a number of years) but also to her own maternal relationship. “There’s an inherent, inescapable tension between mothers and daughters and they’re doomed, really, to have difficult relationships”. *The Lost Mother* is a plea to them all to put things right “in the living years”, as Mike Rutherford suggested in his timeless song.

Cate Kennedy & Heather Rose, with Charlotte Wood

The World Beneath; The River Wife

The hold Tasmania has on the Australian consciousness was the common theme connecting the thoughts of these two intensely evocative writers. “In Tasmania, we can start to get a feeling of what it’s like to be indigenous”, Rose said midway through the session. “It’s easy to ‘do place’, in Tasmania”. In *The River Wife*, she explores the ideas that landscape is the minutiae of weather and that our water is all the water there has ever been, and therefore contains all the stories ever told. Her mythical River Wife’s job is to keep the threads of these stories clear and connected.

In *The World Beneath*, Kennedy considers ‘the way we live now’, describing the “half life of our Homeric underworld” as a metal fogginess, the price we pay for self-delusion and our propensity to lie to ourselves. She was especially critical of “our generation’s aggrieved sense of its thwarted entitlement. Our fictional mosaic of spirituality – yoga, tarot, self-help CDs – persuades us we can buy our way out of addressing the uncertain space inside us”. But eventually, she says, there’s no way to avoid the reality of our powerlessness. Trollope would have approved. Little really changes.

Moderator, Charlotte Wood (whose *The Children* skillfully conjures a different and equally powerful sense of Australian place), observed that human beings are as acquisitive in conservation matters as they are in the supermarket, deftly prompting discussion on the idea that even the best-intentioned of us seek a selfish end and concluding with the surreal notion that perhaps there may be some great secret Tasmania and its forests are withholding from us. Both enthused about their dealings with Scribe Publications.

Michael Otterman, with Sara Dowse

Erasing Iraq

If you want to know what’s going on in Iraq, read the bloggers reporting from inside the country before you read the embedded journalists, says human rights activist and journalist Michael Otterman. “If we really let people see [what has happened in Iraq] there would never be a war there”.

For Iraq, he said, the war began in 1991 when the country’s infrastructure was devastated and its health care system, formerly the best in the Middle East, destroyed by sanctions. An American himself (he’s previously chronicled the history of US torture in his book *American Torture*), Otterman is sceptical that much has changed since the end of the presidency of George W Bush “...for whom, ironically, the whole protest movement merely confirmed his own correctness in establishing democracy by force”. He described Tony Blair, for his continuing defence of the war despite the demolition of all justifying evidence, as delusional; and he recalled a word first used in Bosnia to depict the destruction of the Iraqi way of life. “Western

intervention in this country amounts to sociocide and has made it almost impossible to live there now”.

David Carlin & Vivienne Ulman, with Ed Campion

Our Father Who Wasn't There; Alzheimer's: A Love Story

A conversation with David Carlin and Vivienne Ulman on their moving family memoirs, expertly moderated by Ed Campion, revisited the theme of getting things said to loved ones while you still can. His father, Brian, took his life when Carlin was just six months old, when such things were not discussed in rural Western Australia. “You just can't ever fully get there, in terms of understanding suicide within a family”, he said. Nonetheless, his book has been described as a masterful attempt to do just that, creating both tribute and personal release.

Ulman documents her mother's gradual descent into Alzheimer's disease and her father's inspiring care for her. She didn't hold back on honesty either, describing in moving detail the time her ailing mother turned against her after mistakenly blaming her for a fall. “And I knew this wasn't my mother ... but it *felt* like it was her”.

The painful emotions presented here were superbly managed in the best of taste by Campion, whose courage in pushing a difficult envelope was matched only by his natural empathy. An extraordinary session.

Anna Goldsworthy, with Peter Bishop

Piano Lessons

This is the kind of conversation Peter Bishop excels at. For Varuna's Creative Director, a classical musician himself, it was always going to be a joy to talk with one of Australia's foremost concert pianists about the nature of music and the teaching she received from her gifted Russian teacher, Mrs Sivan. An example. “Love, generosity and openness is the essence of music. If you don't have these, neither will your notes”. Music as a reflection of the player's spirituality? More please.

“Every time you step on stage or into a recording studio”, Goldsworthy said, “you're obliged to be a genius. I'm astonished [performers] don't fall apart more often”. *Piano Lessons* is a memoir, certainly, but it's really about the relationship between music, teaching and the heart. “I can't give you the seed”, says Mrs Sivan early in the pianist's development, “but whatever, and whoever, you are I can maximize it”. What a privilege to have had such insights, Goldsworthy acknowledged.

A protégé of Shostakovich, Eleonora Sivan taught her about the infinite variety of sound available from a piano's keys and the notion that a single note has its own life, with the shape and emotional nature of its finale determined entirely by the feeling preceding the first and only touch. After an hour of Anna Goldsworthy and the insights Bishop drew from her I felt, as someone who's enjoyed music all his life, that at last I had perhaps begun, just a little, to understand it.

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Tuesday March 18

Shirley Walker, with Peter Bishop

The Ghost At The Wedding

Having successfully closed the day on an emotional high, Bishop developed the momentum at the start of day two, opening with Shirley Walker's evocative and sometimes distressing account of two world wars from the point of view of a new bride.

The Penguin Varuna Scholarship Winner painted a vivid picture of 1850s Scottish Presbyterian immigration to the Clarence River district in northern NSW. Marrying into a family touched by war over three generations, she poignantly described the loss of fathers and sons in one war and the manufacture, as it must have seemed to 1930s mothers, of new babies for the next. She spoke of the anguish of German and Italian settlers, too, who in the absence of a familiar spiritual environment went over the Presbyterian Free Kirk where, Bishop added dryly, "... they were warmly welcomed, I'm sure". It reminded me of my time in the north coast Scottish town of Thurso, invented for granite and straight lines, where my B&B displayed a notice in the bedroom saying "One shower, per guest, per stay ONLY".

Ultimately an optimistic book, *The Ghost At The Wedding* relates the establishment of 'soldier settlement' farms on two of Australia's big rivers – platforms for "new generations of personal paradise, and all that can grow from that ... it's a celebration of women's strength and courage, watching successive waves of damaged male psyches being visited on the following generations". More recurring themes. "There's always a distance between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. You've stolen their most precious possession and they won't ever quite forgive you".

Yiyun Li, with Carol Major

The Vagrants

Teacher Gu begins a letter to his wife 'Greatly Respected Comrade Cheng'. The author enquires "How do you decide which loved one you must betray, when your own survival depends on it?". It was clear we were in for a commanding conversation.

Though she's being compared to Tolstoy and Chekhov, it's a writer of a later generation who came to mind, for me, reading Yiyun Li's shocking and brilliant novel *The Vagrants*. But not even in Orwell's *1984* does one encounter the stark, conveyor belt horror of the totalitarian society she completely conveys. Her descriptions are all the more confronting because they're written with absolute matter of factness, as if the lives and events described are the most natural thing in the world, instead of the most unnatural.

She brought the same quality to this session, recalling her schoolgirl memories from the cultural revolution when a day off school to witness a public denunciation and execution was a joyful, festive occasion. While the events and attitudes of her characters are at once repellent and heroic, her writing is unambiguously beautiful as if drawing some peculiar reverse power from the ghastly scenario unfolding like a slow motion dream. Using a skilful vignette technique, she ensures events and dialogue in one family throw light upon those in another, thereby eliminating excess description. This is very accomplished writing indeed, capturing entirely the tragedies of two women in a Chinese province, and the all-enveloping daily tragedies of their city.

Although these events (based on a real story) are set thirty years ago China is still the nation where coal miners' deaths number four times the global total; where Tibet and Xinjiang, with their surgically re-created demographics, remain oppressed; and where schoolchildren die in earthquakes beneath substandard school buildings. So it's doubly tempting to form judgments about the world's willingness to do business with a regime that compels students to watch

public executions for fun. Reading this book, you'll no longer wonder why human beings can be moulded. Li lives in Oakland and you tend to believe her when she says "...these things, in the right circumstances, could occur anywhere, even in America. When horrible things happen we turn away, neighbor turns against neighbor.

"Children are the watchers of society. Though the book's not autobiographical, you must always have a stake in a novel and I wrote this book to explain my own childhood. We live in the grey area between extremes and the novelist's job is to describe the shades". Suddenly, the Russian comparisons seem much less like marketing speak. "I like Russian stories because they're so deeply characterised with love, philosophy, purpose. Most of us just talk about frivolity in a family. Nine out of ten young writers write to be felt but I want to describe how someone else feels, someone I don't know".

In her early thirties now, one wonders with some awe what she will be writing in another generation's time. But for now, do not miss *The Vagrants*. I hope a film can be made of this astonishing book. Done properly it will dumbfound the world, though Beijing won't like it at all.

Rick Gekoski, with Ed Campion

A Bookseller's Memoir

An academic turned international rare bookseller, Rick Gekoski is also a writer and raconteur of renown with an endearing habit of disparaging someone in mock critical style and then saying "Great writer. I have a lot of time for her". Thus it was when he described an alarming 1971 chance encounter with Germaine Greer, the first of many fascinating narratives which included his dealings with Ted Hughes and Graham Greene; Greene's friendship with princess Margaret and his practice of writing down all his dreams; Matthew Arnold's reflections on the value of great lines of poetry ("they are touchstones, acting as indicators of really accomplished poetry"); and the way "quite" signifies the opposite in America to its meaning in Britain.

Gekoski crowned his sitting with an amusing account of his attempt to purchase, through the KGB, a cache of material belonging to the British spy, Kim Philby, following Philby's defection to Moscow. It included a first edition of Peter Wright's *Spycatcher*, inscribed by Greene to Philby, prompting Ed Campion to recall that Wright's defence counsel in the trial to allow publication had been a little known Australian lawyer named Malcolm Turnbull. The cache also included Philby's espionage archives and Gekoski had already approached the British Library, which was prepared to purchase subject to Home Office approval. The many twists and turns encompassed the conclusion of a deal in Moscow, the removal of the books to London and their provisional pricing, the illegal KBG entry into Gekoski's Bloomsbury office (to ascertain his asking price), the call to say the Russians had decided to renege on the deal and the acquisition of the material soon afterwards by Sotheby's.

Sprinkled among the humour were some useful truths from the Chair of the 2010 Man Booker International Prize. "There's a lot of rationalising going on within us all the time which we're unaware of and which, by and large, does us little good. Trust intuition".

Kate Howarth, with Carol Major

Ten Hail Marys

Entrenched misogyny, this time in state ward systems, recurred in the conversation between indigenous writer, Kate Howarth, and Carol Major. Howarth wrote the story of her childhood, her rape at fourteen, her institutionalisation as a state ward in a home for unwed mothers and her subsequent insistence that she keep her child (not the offspring of the rape) as a challenge to evidence presented by the Sisters of St Joseph to the 1998-2000 NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Adoption Practices.

“I had a nine pound baby at fifteen”, she said, “with no preparation in the institution for either birth or feeding. The assumption from the outset was that I would give up my baby, or could be forced to. Adoption in the sixties was ‘closed’, which meant you signed a form saying you would never seek information or try to make contact. Adoption agents worked with single mothers and adoptive couples, creating huge pressure to relinquish”. She didn’t. “Why? There’s no word in any aboriginal language for ‘bastard’ ”. But 150,000 other young mothers did. “The emotional scars they carried passed into following generations. It was a huge fracturing of Australian society”.

Support for unwed mothers in NSW had, in fact, been available since 1923 and had been strengthened by new legislation in 1939, she said. “This was concealed from me and from all those women because it was fundamental to the pressure on us that we believed no support was available”. Once established as relinquishing mothers, she added, their predicament was confirmed through shame. “They were the ‘mothers who didn’t want their own babies’ ”.

Howarth says her book is not a memoir but a voice for mothers and an account of her ability to “punch through”, which she attributes to two centuries of indigenous struggle.

Cate Kennedy and Patrick Cullen, with Tegan Bennett Daylight

Short Fiction

Two accomplished short story writers discussed short fiction and prose in general. “I never, ever plan anything”, said Kennedy. “Writing is like a beautiful equation. You can watch the solution materialising as you proceed. About the only plot I ever have is that things get worse. Let it write itself. Take interesting characters, make something happen to challenge them and show what happens as a result”.

By example, she said the story of a war could be told in the experience of a soldier in one day, one minute, or one moment. “Character is everything. I want them to be tested, to know what *they* want”.

What about deciding which person to write in? Whichever is most suitable, thought Cullen. And how do you find that out? Third person seemed safest, if in doubt, they both seemed to think, but “...limitation in short fiction is great and using the first person characters can betray themselves without realising it”, Kennedy believed. “And using the second person can be useful in creating a coercive atmosphere – ‘you pick up the gun, you go down to the freeway, etc’ ”, Cullen continued.

What about a male writer describing a female character? How do you dissociate yourself if you choose the first person? “You ask yourself what’s their motivation and then give them mannerisms you don’t use yourself”, said Kennedy and often, added Cullen, a simple line of dialogue will be enough.

Discussion turned to exemplary short stories, the value of a good reader and writer’s block. All were unanimous that Tim Winton’s *The Turning* was perhaps the finest collection currently available. “A good reader will get you straight to the heart of any problems you may need to fix”, Kennedy said. And tackling writer’s block? “Do mindless, repetitive, boring work!”.

And so to the bar.

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Audience Response

As with the Blue Mountains Music Festival, visitors to the Writers' Festival seem to find something special here. Authors, too, comment continually on the generosity of spirit and intellectual penetration of this regional audience.

Participants are local, from Sydney and from further afield. On her fourth trip from WA, Sandie Harvey told me it was a time for seeing old and new friends, not only in person but through their books. "It's exciting gathering new ideas, both happy and sad. I go home to Perth feeling refreshed, with a year's worth of new books to read. The Carrington venue is especially good, allowing the audience to wholly concentrate on the speakers".

Veronica Keating, from Stanmore in Sydney, came for the humanity. "This is not just a well run event, with passion and commitment", she told me. "It's a writers' festival for writers. To be able to benefit from and connect with the life experience these speakers share is a privilege. As Anna [Goldsworthy] said, the 'what' and the 'why' are much more important than the 'how'".

Dean Letcher QC, also traveling each year from Sydney with his partner Irene, enjoys the variety of writers. "I was particularly moved by Shirley Walker's session", he said. "We come here regularly because it's a good way to stay informed on the evolving state of Australian writing".

Festival Quotes

"The toughest thing for a writer is learning not to be afraid to just get it down onto the page"
Tristan Bancks

"Lots of people write about their families. But they have to write with a passion, about the people, and not just make it a procession of events" **Shirley Walker**

"Good prose is like a window pane" **George Orwell**, from his essay 'Why I Write', recounted by Ed Champion (*search '2005 David Woods essay'*)

"Good writing is like a butler. It should present itself and then withdraw" **Gustave Flaubert**, recounted by Cate Kennedy

"What marks our era ...is the moaning of our bones crushed beneath the weight of empty words" **Yiyun Li's** character, Teacher Gu, in *The Vagrants*

"The first line in every book should quietly suggest 'Trust Me' " **Michael Ondaatje**, recounted by Cate Kennedy

"Do you know what Tony Blair once told me? He said 'If you don't answer their questions, they'll answer them for you' " **Vaclav Havel**, recounted from the audience

"Reading is neither good for you nor bad for you. But reading *is* formative" **Rick Gekoski**

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pen.org

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