

2011 NSW Premier's Literary Awards – Key Note Address
Dr Anita Heiss

Rights = Responsibilities

Good evening everyone. I am from the Wiradjuri nation from central NSW, I'm a Williams from Cowra. I was born in Gadigal country and have spent most of my life living on Dharawal land near La Perouse. I pay my respects to the custodians and caretakers of country here and thank Aunty Norma for the warm welcome.

To some I'm affectionately known as a Concrete Koori with Westfield Dreaming and in recent years having created what is termed 'Koori chick-lit' or what Blackfellas call 'choc-lit', I've also earned the name of Koori Bradshaw. At the end of the day, I am just one of 5000 published Indigenous Australian writers, all doing the same thing – regardless of genre – and that is, we are writing ourselves, our stories, our every day lives, our notions of truth in history, our own expressions of identity and our aspirations as citizens, into Australian literature.

Nights like these cause me to reflect on why I write. I don't write for glory or glamour. I don't write for fun or for profit. I write because I want to make social change. I want Australians to learn and think about their First Nations people. I want Australian children in schools nationally to read about the lives of Koori kids at La Perouse. I want students to be learning their *complete* history including that of the Stolen Generations. I want those who buy commercial women's fiction to also engage with the stories of urban-Aboriginal women's lives and our place in Australian society.

I was first inspired to write when I was an undergraduate student at UNSW in 1991. I was doing my honours degree in History with a thesis on the 1967 Referendum and citizenship rights for Aborigines. I chose that topic because at the time of the referendum my Austrian-born father was counted on the census, although he didn't become a citizen until 1968.

My sister was counted on the census because she was the daughter of a white man. There were counts done on cattle in this country. But my mother wasn't counted. When I was old enough to understand the Government considered animals more important than my Mum, I was duly appalled.

During my Honours year I was required to give a presentation on a book uniquely titled *Australian Aborigines*, compiled by someone who had never been to Australia, but whose knowledge was based on letters he received from a friend

here in the new colony. His friend would write letters saying: 'Today we did this with the natives, and today we did that...'

One letter was about how his friend went hunting with five Aboriginal men one day. They left him for a short period of time and only four returned, so he immediately assumed they ate the fifth one. He concluded there and then that Aborigines were cannibals, he wrote a letter back to Britain saying so, and 100 years later I picked the book off the shelf at UNSW. It was at that very moment I realised two things that would determine my future direction as a writer:

Firstly, there is no such thing as absolute truth in history because everything is subjective, just like the perceived cannibal experience of one person, at one moment in time. Obviously, the way in which the colonizers perceive and record history, is always going to be significantly different to the ways in which the colonized perceive and record history.

And secondly, I realised the importance of using the skills I had learned and honed at university, to tell the stories for those who couldn't. As someone considered to be privileged within my own community because I have had tertiary education, I have a responsibility to use that learning.

It was with that sense of responsibility that I researched and wrote *Who am I? the diary of Mary Talence, Sydney 1937*, an historical novel on the Stolen Generations. The story deals with the emotional, psychological and physical journey of one girl who is removed under the Act of Protection in New South Wales, and taken to Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home, before being fostered by an Irish-Catholic family on Sydney's North Shore. Within that journey we see the destructive forces of the assimilation policy and how government attempted the disconnection of Aboriginal people from their families, country and identities. Mary is fictional although my own grandmother was taken under the Act with her sister, to Cootamundra Girls Home, before she went to the Home of the Good Shepherd in Ashfield and then into service.

My mentor on that novel was the multi-award winner author of over 30 books, Libby Gleeson. She has remained an inspiration to me in terms of my writing largely because the sense of responsibility she maintains in her own work. Libby says: *I write to work out a truth. Anything sensational or gratuitous has to go as I try to wrestle my way down to a subtle understanding of human beings and behaviour. My responsibility is to the story and its characters and to my own integrity.'*

The one thing I remind myself of when writing is that when we die, we take our opinions with us, but the written word lasts forever. And that is why we as writers must have integrity in our work. To me, this integrity comes in the form of methodology when researching, in abiding by an industry code of ethics, but also my own moral codes.

When I wrote *Who Am I?* I not only relied on official documents housed at AIATSIS in Canberra, and the *Bringing them Home Report*, but I also sat with someone who had been in Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home for nine years. I sent drafts to Link Up NSW for accuracy and approval because I was not writing this story for Anita Heiss. I was writing this story for those who needed their own stories told, verified, authenticated, and most importantly, read!

In recent years I have strategically targeted a largely 18-45 year old female readership who may never have engaged with Aboriginal Australia in any meaningful way before – through friendships, through our arts and culture, or through the politics and issues that may be termed 'Aboriginal', but are indeed Australian. I use an angle of sameness as my hook, because I feel there is too much emphasis on difference in our society, and because we have far more in common as human beings than we have that is different. Much of our sameness centres on our emotions: we all fall in love, we fall out love, we fear rejection, we experience sadness, grief, and so on. My novels centre on the relationships that women have with each other, with their mother's and their elusive 'One' – which some of my characters believe in, and some don't.

For my novel *Avoiding Mr Right*, my Bundjalung character Peta Tully was born in Coolangatta, lives in Sydney, works in policy development in education, and is in a relationship with James, the perfect man on paper. Peta's holy grail therefore, is not meeting Mr Right, rather, she desperately wants to be the Minister for Cultural Affairs so she can inform policy that will affect her people. So when she is offered a job in Melbourne heading up the new body DOMSARIA which is the Department of Media, Sports, Arts, Refugees and Indigenous Affairs – she has a real chance at moving towards realising her dream.

Peta takes the job, and tries convincing her boyfriend she will be celibate for the 12 months while she is there. Anyway, my character soon learned that taking a man to Melbourne was like taking a sandwich to a smorgasbord. When Peta goes to Melbourne she shops, dines and has extraordinary international astral sex – a tool I used because she couldn't cheat on her boyfriend because no-one would like her as a character, and I wanted her to be a role-model to young women also. But having sex in your dreams isn't really cheating, is it?

As a method writer, I had to get into character and head to Melbourne. Of course, my research included going to the AFL, the Vic Markets, restaurants, cafes, bars, shopping, museums, galleries, catching trams, eating too many cakes on Acland Street St Kilda, and of course, perving on all the gorgeous, single men.

The work was not all food and fun though. With Peta Tully and *Avoiding Mr Right* I pushed the boundaries further in terms of the genre. Peta tackles not only interracial relationships but the relationship between the Aboriginal community and the police force, giving commentary on Black deaths in custody. She marches against the NT intervention, has conversations about methodologies of

'studying' Indigenous people in communities, and Indigenous intellectual property. She also attends numerous NAIDOC events around the state of Victoria.

I take my research so seriously, I even went on a date with a cop for *Avoiding Mr. Right and* had a genuine argument about Palm Island. This conversation of course was not planned, although it *was* inevitable.

For my recent novel *Paris Dreaming* I, as a committed researcher, had to go to Paris, of course. I cruised the Seine, strolled the Champs-Elysee, shopped in designer stores and flea markets, ate macaroons and croissants and of course, did the touristy Moulin Rouge and the can-can; or as my character says the can't can't or the won't won't.

I interviewed staff at the Australian Embassy and the Musee du Quai Branly and sent them drafts. I sent relevant pages to the curators of the Indigenous Commission at the Musee and most of the living artists I mentioned in the book, even if the material I gathered about them was already in the public domain. I know only too well that what is reported in the public domain isn't necessarily the truth. One must check their facts therefore, before reproducing inaccuracies.

My characters live, say and behave like real women I know. They are authentic to me and the world I live in. And I use my writing to educate and empower my readers about the complexities of an urban Aboriginal experience, but also on issues *all* Australians should have an awareness of. I see that educational role as my responsibility as a writer.

There has been much talk of late about the right to free speech in terms of what we create and publish. What I have noticed most during these discussions is the absence of comment from writers about the *responsibilities* that come with having rights. As well as the responsibility to use our rights appropriately and, most importantly, respectfully.

I was grateful therefore for the words of Dr Rosie Scott, award-winning author, former Chair of the ASA and former Vice-President of PEN Sydney – an organisation who fights for the rights of imprisoned writers who don't have the 'free speech' we so readily enjoy. Rosie said: *'Free speech is the cornerstone of genuine democracy, but when writers publish disinformation dressed up as fact, lies as truth, slander as objective evaluation and call it free speech, they are devaluing its very essence and betraying all those who've fought for it.'*

I have worked with both the Australia Council for the Arts and the Australian Society of Authors to protect and promote the rights of authors, but I also work to promote the responsibilities we have to create meaningful cultural products. I have been part of the process of developing protocols for researching and writing about Indigenous Australia and in developing a code of ethics checklist to ensure that the final product, the book that the Australian reader grabs off the shelf, is the

best it can be. I quite strongly feel that the process of researching a story is just as important as writing the story itself. If the process of developing a work has disempowered someone, then what is the real worth of your book?

I have a moral code as a writer that monitors my responsibility largely to the Aboriginal community, whom I am often expected to represent. But as my friend and nominee here tonight Alex Miller points out, *all* writers must demonstrate moral responsibility through their work. Alex says: *'The contemporary and private moral dimensions of the culture a writer inhabits clamour to be explored. No serious writer remains aloof from the moral dimensions of his or her own private morality, or the morality of their larger communal life.'*

But, it's not just we writers as the creator of stories who hold responsibility of what goes into the public domain. Our editors and publishers too, play a role in the overall product. And my own publisher, Larissa Edwards at Random House wrote to me this week saying the responsibility as a publisher is *'To remember at all times that we are producing works that will enrich and inhabit people's interior lives.'*

Enrich and inhabit. Empower and engage. Educate and entertain. Responsibility and authenticity. Truth and integrity. These are my values and my goals as a writer. Indeed, they are qualities I expect as a reader.

I'd like you to consider now the words of writer Kathryn Heyman, my kayak instructor and coincidentally, a judge of tonight's Christina Stead Award. Kathryn says: *Social theorist Jurgen Habermas held that all language points in the direction of truth and is distorted when it veers away from truth. Actually, the very first thing its possible to do with language is to make up stories that are not true. So there is, in my opinion, a moral responsibility for every storyteller to decide what they are going to do with that power. If as writers we fail to engage with that fundamental question of ethics, then it's an enormous failure of courage.'*

My goal tonight was to inspire you to consider *your own* responsibilities and to write and publish with integrity and courage. I hope I have gone some way to doing that. If what I have said challenges you in anyway, then you might want to ask yourself, *why?*

Thank you.

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