

OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

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PhD *Letters Causa Honoris***

Delivered at the graduation ceremony for graduates from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences; the Institute for International Studies; and the Institute for Sustainable Futures

Great Hall, City Campus, Wednesday 4 May 2005, 10.30am

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Faculty Deans, staff, distinguished guests, graduates and their families and friends.

Oh to be young, and to be a graduate, even in a risky world! Congratulations. I envy you the challenges that lie ahead, and as for challenges, I'm sure today you feel up to them. And congratulations to the parents who raised this clever generation.

As you know, I'm a writer. I have a book coming out later this year about the Georgian era, in which the despised convicts were shipped here. In Warrane, Sydney Cove, the sky fell in and eleven ghost islands, the ships of the First Fleet, entered with their new model of culture and their European bacteria. These bacteria had an early impact on the Eora people. I thus acknowledge the men and women of the Eora language group and the Guring-gai clan, who held the secrets of this place ever since the end of the Last Ice Age re-moulded this coastline.

Writers are not always the most noble or generous of human beings. Charles Dickens, who could love children so robustly in his novels, was impatient of the lack of academic achievement of two of his sons and so sent them to the outer darkness of Australia, where their lives out in the Broken Hill-Wilcannia area took on more the character of tragedy than success. Patrick White, a genius who lived at Centennial Park, was nonetheless utterly unforgiving of the peccadillos of his friends, and imperfect himself, demanded nothing less than perfection in everyone who sat at his table. Gore Vidal the American writer confesses to all the meanness of writers when he said that he never hears of the literary success of a friend without something inside him dying a little.

But writers have always wanted to examine and are attracted to writing about the ongoing drama of race hysteria, of our human passion for tribal pretensions, of our insatiable addiction to scape-goating. Mistrust and division are one of our chief sports, the grimmest, meanest but most instinctive of sports that our species has come up with. And yet the story of love and fraternity across the tribal, cultural and political divide is one that writers love to exploit – what else was Shakespeare doing in *Romeo and Juliet*, or Alan Paton in *Cry, the Beloved Country*? In all genres, writers spend a lot of time trying to write about people who are separated from each other by social or cultural faultlines, who live on either side of a divide. The last time I made that point, a poet told me I was idealising writers, who were often “s---ts and b-ds.” That is the truth too. You can ask my wife later the exact ways in which I fit those categories. But I was not so much exalting writers as giving their job description. By temperamental impulse, the writer seeks to inhabit other skins. I suppose even my own books *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and *Schindler's Ark* is a small example of my attempt to occupy the skins of people beneath the tyranny of the Third Reich.

So often novelists try to write stories which break down the them-and-us fables by which society is divided and by which political machines lock in the vote, or popular journalism locks in sales. What we write is frequently something to do, indirectly, with human rights. So it is no wonder that under tyrants and regimes, writers go to prison. In a liberal democracy like Australia, we don't, and so I speak today without fear, and I hope the government will continue to neglect to lock me up. As well as governments, fundamentalism of all kinds, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, is a fertile source of *fatwahs*, of the kind which led to the assassination of Dutch writer-film-maker Theo Van Gogh in Holland recently.

Writers get into trouble with regimes not because they are necessarily saintly but because they often want to tell the story of human complexity. They want to tell us a tale which links our own experience to that of someone we might not previously have felt identity with.

It became obvious to the writers' organisation PEN, whose Sydney Centre is based in this university, that we had a duty towards writers who were or had been in Australia detention centres.

Now, don't mistake what I'm saying. I'm not trying to start a fight on a happy day. And I'm not saying Australia doesn't have the right to reject people, or the right to process them. It does and it should. But we do claim that under international law, once we've worked out they are not Osama Bin Ladin's cousin, Australia has no right to punish asylum seekers, including children, with indefinite imprisonment, and to go on imprisoning them by imprisonment when they have been rejected but can't return to their home country. For we impose on them sentences far in excess of what anyone associated with HIH will ever face.

Members of Pen feel we have a duty as writers not only to such professional writers as Cheik Kone, a charming Ivory Coast journalist who was locked in detention for years. But we also have a duty to those who had been driven to writing as a means of dealing with their experience of what is, according to the Royal Australian College of Psychiatry, a toxic system.

Our interest in this issue was not gratuitous – it arose in part because Pen International had already condemned the Australian mandatory detention system. Pen's belief was that the voices of detainees, if permitted to emerge, would be so obviously the voices of fellow pilgrims that we would see how flimsy was the separation between them and us. Their voices ring through the collection of asylum seeker writing Pen produced, *Another Country*, published by Pen Sydney Centre, edited by Pen committee members, Rosie Scott and myself.

"Fellow creature," writes Mahommed Reza "Tony" Zandavar, Iranian poet detained for five years in Port Hedland for the crime of seeking asylum,
"seconds are pregnant with panic and anxiety here
And worried, frightened eyes are witness to human beings'
devastation.
... between madness and insanity anodynes are best
'some for morning, some for night'..."

Aamer Sultan, Iraqi doctor, detained for over three and a half years, confesses to the damage done by life behind the tall walls and razor-wire. "My reaction, my attempts to make a difference have shifted from anger, shouting, advocating, networking and humble individual support to that of feeling simply disempowered and simply stunned, shamed and depressed. Totally disillusioned about the western world humanitarian utopia I used to believe in."

Mohsen Sultani Zand is an Iranian musician and poet who spent years in Port Hedland and Villawood, and writes sceptically:

“I see a hyena that is waiting for the ‘war on terrorism’
I see a shark that is trying to rescue boat people
I see a prisoner mouse making a party for the cat
I see a fox teaching freedom to the hen and rooster
I see an executioner putting the mask of religion on his face
I see a locust sowing a green field for humanity
I see an elephant stepping tentatively to avoid crushing the ant
I see a hungry wolf shaking hands with the lamb...”

Nasrim Nahouchi, Iranian refugee, wrote of her imprisonment in Iran, and thus of the sort of regimes from which asylum seekers understandably flee. In prison, she writes, “I just gave birth to a baby. That [other] mother lost her life to give birth to her baby. The war gives birth to powerful faces with disabled bodies. Two people come to the door and order me to put my chador on and stand up facing the wall. Then they come in and order me to collect my things..... Next to the last drawing [on the prison wall], I draw a little violet flower for her [my daughter’s] birthday. Then I write:

During the war, one night in this prison: A baby girl dies a baby girl is born.”

So the voices came, and all I claim today is that they were human voices, and don’t deserve what’s happened to them. Your specialties, from the humanities to international relations, equip you to believe not only in cultural difference but in the abiding humanity of our species, its aspirations and yearnings, its cunning and flaws. With your glorious degrees comes a responsibility to be the last to stereotype or scapegoat any economic or racial group. As a metaphor for solidarity across the cultures, I refer to the scientist in charge of the human Genome map project, an American named Francis Collins. I remember sharing a radio interview with him in which he continually emphasised that between any two people, say George Bush and Saddam Hussein, there was only 0.1% genetic difference. I liked the idea because it means Brad Pitt and I share 99.9% of our genetic material. But it also means that in the fight between acceptance and denial, between hate and love, we only have one species to work with, the human one, and hate is self-hate, and self-hate is unworthy of a graduate of such a notable institution.

Thank you all. And congratulations. And may your talents be rewarded in every area of your lives.