

Hippocrates and Socrates

Westmead, August, 2003 Libby Gleeson

Thank you for inviting me to open your conference. When I heard the title I was hooked, seduced by images of science and philosophy, medicine and logical argument. I think I would have accepted the invitation, whatever the content and struggled to find a connection.

And it has been a struggle. Although a reasonably well read member of the community, and a trained language teacher, I would be lying if I said I was anything other than ignorant about neuropsychology and current theories of language acquisition, let alone any theories regarding developmental delay or serious disorders.

What I do know about is writing. I not only know about it, I care about writing and about reading and about literacy and about the power, the sometimes liberating power of story.

And of course story can come in any number of ways – our visual media are replete with story and our children are adept consumers of the form. But for me, nothing beats the power of the written word, the quiet, private contemplation of the book, the experience of the word stimulating the mind to, as I say to children when I read them a story, to make the pictures in your head.

Let me begin by sharing with you an extract from the book I've just finished reading. [The Curious Incident of the Dog In The Night](#). (p31/34)

That extract was from chapter 47. Chapter 47 happens to run from page 31 – 34. Strange? Not so when you realise that each chapter in the book is numbered with a prime number ...2, 5, 7, 11, 13 ... and so on.

You may already be aware of this book – it is in the news in the literary community and maybe in your own professional areas. It has been marketed as a book for young adults but is also being sold in the adult section of shops and is being seen as what we call a cross-over title. And it has been put on the long-list for the Booker prize. The title comes from a moment in [The Hound of the Baskervilles](#).

Inspector Gregory says, *'Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?'*

Holmes replies, *'To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.'*

The Inspector says, *'The dog did nothing in the night-time.'*

Holmes says, *'That was the curious incident.'*

The main character, 15-year-old Christopher Bone has Aspergers Syndrome. He lives in the English town of Swindon and he attends a school for children with Special Needs. He is also brilliant at mathematics and plans to do his A-levels and attend University to study maths and physics. He wakes one morning to find the neighbour's dog, dead on the footpath with a gardening fork through it. He determines to find the killer – inspired somewhat by his own love of Sherlock Holmes. That investigation takes him out of his environment, in fact to London, an adventure for a boy like Christopher, of almost unimaginable difficulty.

I first became aware of Aspergers Syndrome, no doubt like many others in this country, at the trial of Martin Bryant. Not long after that I realised that two children I knew, children of friends of mine had the syndrome.

I was, and still am, fairly ignorant of the details. I am aware that, like Christopher, there are behavioural problems that the child and the family deal with all the time. Christopher lists his, (p59)

But what I want to say this morning is that this book has been a revelation to me.

I challenge any reader to take this book and not feel a wealth of understanding, of empathy flowing from being inside the mind of Christopher.

Some books I read for simple pleasure. There is delight in the ideas and the language. But other books leave their mark, leave me with the feeling of *'why didn't I know this?'*

The last time it happened so profoundly was with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. That is a story set in the aftermath of the American Civil War. It follows the fortunes of Sethe, a freed slave. I had, in the past, studied American history, I had read accounts of slavery and post-Civil War America. But nothing prepared me for this novel, this sweeping startling, rhythmic, poetic story that made me see what that time was like for a black woman. Not every black woman, but this one, who could be anyone. The story, the imagery the language was unbearable.

The two books I have referred to are very, very different. One is written in the simple syntax, the blunt directness of a person unversed in the subtleties and the overwhelming poetic power of the other. But each has affected me by allowing me in to the world of another.

It is presumptuous of me to suggest that I truly became and knew Christopher, or Sethe, but I do believe I was allowed greater knowledge, more than a glimpse into their worlds by the power of their stories.

At this point I want to stop and think for a moment about this whole business of making up stories. It's something that only humans do. There are those who believe that this is what makes us human. Other creatures communicate in order to attract a mate, or to warn of danger. But humans, as far as we are aware are the only species who create a tale to tell – and tales to read.

We do it all the time.

Gossip is one of the most enduring styles of it – not taken seriously by most, but putting together a regular story about who did what to whom and when is excellent training for a writer. It's the story of our lives, told in daily episodes. Being able to tell our story helps us to know who we are and keeps us sane.

It is a small step from there to being able to write a story, first imagining oneself in a different time or place, projecting from yourself to another and creating a fiction. And some of us get so hooked on words and the patterns we can make from them that creating stories becomes the way we express ourselves creatively. Some people tell their stories in paint, in dance or in some other form. We do it with language.

I read because I want to experience other lives. I cannot live in Tudor England, in revolutionary France or in the America of the Civil War. I cannot be inside the head of a child with Asperger's. But reading can take me there. When reading I am touched by the power of words to give me the emotion, the feeling the thoughts the lives of other human beings. Reading other people's stories gives it to me. By writing I discover it for myself and I hope I give it to others. Although I do not see myself in the same category as those I've been speaking of this morning.

C.S. Lewis said it a little better. Through literature, he *wrote 'I become a thousand other people and yet remain myself.'*

I used the phrase *'the power of words.'*

Books are powerful because knowing is powerful. Through books you know. You know people. You can listen to the voice of someone who lives or lived in another time and another place. People who discovered or created who celebrated or who suffered.

Paul Jennings, who I'm sure you all know, put it more simply – *I don't bash people up because I read books – I know what it's like to be other.*

And isn't knowing and understanding each other our most important human attribute. But it isn't only reading stories that is so powerful. There is power also for the writer. The very act of writing, of putting words together, of shaping them into sentences and then paragraphs and whole texts creates, in the mind new images, new ideas, new ways expressing. You bring into life characters and a created work that did not exist before and you put it out there for others to experience. Sometimes I write to find out what I know. It is as if there is subterranean knowledge in the mind and the act of writing stimulates it and brings it forward.

I want to make here what Christopher would call a digression.

My own love affair with books began very early.

When I was a little girl, about 5, we lived in the small town of Glen Innes on the Northern Tablelands. It was then a very small town. This was the nineteen fifties and there was no public library. The local Apex club decided it would be good for the town if there was a library and so they decided to start with one for children.

There was no librarian in the town, no teacher librarians so they asked my Dad, the head of English at the High School if he would take charge.

And so our house was the place where all the parcels of books would arrive. We would unpack them read them before any other kid in town. My Dad would catalogue them into a big book and then the best part, my sisters got to paint the black squares on the back and write the number on in white ink.

(I was too little) Then on Saturday mornings they could ride their bikes down to the main street, get the key from the baker and then open up the library, which was a small shop. They would be the librarians for the morning. No wonder that one of those sisters ended up a librarian! The books of significance from that early period are lost to me now – probably little Golden books to begin with and then Enid Blyton.

When I ponder the period of my late childhood and early adolescence, a clearer memory is there.

Anne of Green Gables – L.M.Montgomery
Girl of the Limberlost – Gene Stratton Porter

These two are powerful in my memory – Why? Ask myself that question.

Is it just that they are 2 red-headed heroines and I was a red headed, freckled faced kid living in country Australia where I was the only one whose mother said put a hat on to go out. And I didn't. Or was it that they were each alone?

Anne is an orphan who is taken in by a couple and given love but still stands up to the world in what felt to me as an heroic fashion.

And Elnora, in the Girl of the Limberlost, lives with her mother who because of the tragedy of her husband's loss is crazily unable to love her daughter. First published in 1909, this novel begins with an argument between the mother and daughter what would at the time have been called a blistering row! A far cry from the sentimentality of most mother/daughter relationships in the fiction of the time. The daughter wants to go to high school the mother wants to keep her at home. The daughter struggles and struggles and goes. And she pays for her tuition by catching butterflies and moths in the swamp that borders their property, the Limberlost.

I read it again recently for another conference I am attending, trying to work out just why I loved it so much. Through my eyes now it is sentimental and unsubtle. The virtues of honesty, hard work, love of beauty, goodness and Christianity are trumpeted in no uncertain terms. The prose is at times cumbersome

But it is a rich romantic and exotic tale and yet realistic and not fantasy. In retrospect, I think I appreciated that the landscape so loved and celebrated in this book is swampland, it is not the beautiful rolling hills and dales of English story, or the broad acres of [Mary Grant Bruce](#), it was swamp land. And, at times, danger lurked. So my notions of beauty were challenged. There were hints of danger and a dark side to human behaviour. I was truly taken into another world, and I loved it. Elnora is a fiercely independent girl, growing into womanhood. Despite the mother, Elnora is alone. And despite the dated nature of the writing it is a passionately written text. [Gene Stratton Porter](#) was in fact Geneva, a woman and a naturalist and nature photographer who mourned the disregard for the natural world as she watched the destruction of the forests, the draining of swamps and wetlands that happened as capitalist America grew after the Civil War. Elnora is noble and good and intelligent and she is loved too by all around her. There is a strong humanist ethic in here as well as the Christian. Strong notions of service and I have no doubt that it is notions like that from books like The Girl of the Limberlost that have helped make me into the person I am.

But as a writer it was the intelligent female character, the strong girl and the red hair that I wanted to celebrate. I wasn't really fully aware of its influence, indeed I hadn't thought about it for years, but when I wrote my first novel, I named the heroine, Eleanor.

So what does all this mean in the context of your Conference? Hippocrates and Socrates?

I'm going to leave that for you to decide.

One of my favourite writers is [Maurice Gee](#), a New Zealand novelist. One of his novels, [Going West](#), has two poets. The better poet dies and an authorised biography is being written. His friend, the lesser poet decides to tell the real story. At one point he talks of the way his friend commented on

his, the lesser poet's work. He was critical of the way he always spelt out the meaning at the end. It was unnecessary, he said, because image is meaning. Action is meaning. And for me, story is meaning too.

Let me finish with a final reading. This time the last few pages of Christopher's book. I hesitated when I first thought to do this. I thought maybe you wouldn't want to hear what happens on the final pages. And then I reasoned that one doesn't just read to find out what happens in the end – plenty of times we reread for the experience, fully aware of the conclusion.

If, however you do object, put your fingers in your ears.

Christopher has returned to Swindon but is fearful of his father whom he no longer trusts. So he's living with his mother