

Words, Images, Voices

Literature for Children and Young Adults that Speaks of Justice.

It feels a bit strange to be sitting here in the Gleeson auditorium. I believe it is named for Gerry Gleeson who was the head of the Premier's Department. In my family we refer to him as Uncle Gerry, just as we refer to the great surrealist as Uncle James. In a country where we are all the descendants of immigrants who knows – there may be truth in it.

My thoughts on this title of our discussion took me back to questions of why I write, of what motivates a person to invest time and energy for anything up to 3 or 4 years to produce a work that may or may not see the light of day. If it does get published, it may never be reviewed and it may disappear from the shelves after a surprisingly short time.

When I teach creative writing I say what was said to me – write what you know and what you care about. Write what is meaningful to you - which is not shorthand for autobiography – although it may be in a first novel. Write to find out.

It is this last thought that has increasingly become a motivation for me. Write in order to discover what you know and want to know about something. I'll come back to that in a moment. At the same time there are a couple of other thoughts that I hold very dear in the creation of fiction. A book driven only by issues will be a bad book. A fiction has to be driven by story, by the narrative and in my case the starting off point for that is character.

All of my work, from the latest, *Mahtab's Story* which I want to talk about in a moment right back to *Eleanor, Elizabeth* which was first published over twenty years ago have at their heart a character whose relationships and development form the heart of the story. It is possible – indeed I hope – that the reader will so identify with the character and whatever experience the character goes through that she, the reader, will care deeply about the circumstance, but that isn't achieved through didacticism. It's done through the quality of the writing: the choice of character, of the situation they move through, of the images the writer chooses, of the language and the voice and every other bit of the work as a whole.

An example of all this is *Refuge* which began as a work focusing on the growth of the boy character Andrew and his need in a loving family to find his way to separate from his parents and become an independent adult. I was trying to find an action that such a kid could take and I discovered in a newspaper the intention of a particular Catholic nun, Sister Kath O'Connor. She'd established safe houses, places willing to hide East Timorese asylum seekers if the government and the courts resolved to send these young people back to the East Timor (pre the referendum,) Indonesia or Portugal. It proved an ideal cause for my character to take up but it was being driven by the character not the cause.

Where you start and your intentions in writing a work are often very different from the place you end up.

If I go back to the beginnings of *Mahtab's Story*, there is a notebook called The Veil. I began that work because I was genuinely fascinated by why it was that some young Muslim women, from

liberal families where their mothers did not wear the veil, chose to so themselves. What would it do to a friendship if one of a couple of girlfriends decided that she would adopt the veil? Would it fracture friendship? This was all in the context of post 9/11 when the Australian government and the Australian media., and regrettably a section of the Australian community was anti Muslim and was tarring our Muslim community with the same brush as those who had destroyed the twin towers.

What happened next was most instructive. I realised that I didn't know enough about Islam. I had contacts with one family where the different female members made different choices about wearing the veil – but they were long term residents and adult. I felt very strongly that I needed to meet some schoolgirls and that led me to Holroyd High School.

I spoke with Dorothy Hoddinott, the principal who insisted that although she was happy to arrange a meeting with some girls, I should meet first with her and get an understanding of who I would be meeting.

For a number of hours she filled my head with horrendous stories of what some of her students had been through.

Students who had seen members of the family butchered.

Students who had been sent from their homeland, alone, to avoid being the next family member to meet that fate.

Students who, as unaccompanied minors, had not been well looked after by DOCS

Kids who had been in the detention centres and had witnessed others into self harm, abuse and so on.

By the time I left her home, my anger at the government's treatment of refugees was so great that I was convinced that I wanted to write the story of one such person, a girl who had experienced some of what I had heard.

It was a conviction that these stories should be heard.

I didn't want to write a biography. I wanted the freedom of fiction to invent, to leave out and to dramatise events. But I also wanted to ensure that everything in the book could have happened. That meant discovering what had happened and for that I talked with the young women from years 10 and 11 who Dorothy arranged to meet me. From that meeting a friendship developed between me and two young women from Afghanistan: Nahid Karimi and Zahra Shafaq. Nahid's family, Tajiks from Herat in western Afghanistan came on the leaky boats, so-called illegals. Zahra and her mother, Hazaras from Bamian, were acknowledged refugees via the camps in Pakistan. Both families had known murder at the hands of the Taliban.

The novel is based on the story of Nahid's family but significant changes were made to give me freedom to invent and to adapt things that happened to them.

Nahid Karimi is a person like so many others who has suffered terribly. She is a young woman of immense courage and dignity. I wanted to write a fiction that showed that suffering but that also showed the courage of her and of others, and the self belief. I wanted to make real to the reader the story that is not told in the newspapers or on television. I suppose, in a way I want to let them know that our community is made up of so many different stories. We hear so many statistics that our eyes glaze over. The story of one person, told well can make real the tragedy of a situation and arouse empathy. Story as an antidote to officialese or government propaganda.

The desire was clear. The way to do it was not. The temptation was to fall into the very trap that I

said I disapproved of – ie the issue, the failure of our government to be humane in its treatment of refugees, especially children, was so palpable, as was my personal anger, that the issue could overcome the story. The character could get lost in the drama of the journey and the pain of the period when first in Australia.

Whether I have managed to avoid that problem is up to you to decide.

[Mahtab's Story Read Page 24. Libby Gleeson Published by Allen and Unwin, 2008]

I have just finished reading an amazing book: *The Truth About Stories: Thomas King*. It's the book of the Massey lectures in Canada. Thomas King is a Native North American, the first to ever give this lecture series.

Two things stood out for me – actually many things stood out but two I want to mention: The truth about stories is that's all we are. He goes on to tell wonderful stories full of eloquent truths. Each one finishes like this: *Don't say in years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you'd heard this story.* You've heard it now.
Thank you.
