

Sunday, 24 May 2009

Sydney Writers Festival Closing Address by Richard Flanagan

I am reminded standing here of my cousin, Arthur ‘Mad Dog’ Kemp, a professional boxer of falling note in the late 1960s, who featured occasionally on the Golden Gloves tv show, and who was once described by the old Melbourne Sun as ‘having taken the once noble art to a new all-time low’.

In truth the bottle was already winning with Arthur and he took to spending much of his life in the park in Fitzroy with the multi-hued humanity that drank and slept there, including those Aborigines who looked after him.

Some years passed and in 1972 Muhammad Ali flew into Australia. The first thing he said to the crowded press conference at Tullamarine was- where are the black people?

There was stunned silence, but within a short time Ali’s limo was speeding its way to Fitzroy followed by a motorcade of media.

It stopped at the park and Ali made his way across to where Mad Dog Kemp was drinking with a group of blackfellas. Mad Dog still retained something of the old pugilist spirit and, recognising the figure advancing toward them, leapt to his feet, walked over to Ali, and said, ‘You’re not the greatest, I am.’

‘No,’ said Ali. ‘You’re just the ugliest.’

Now I had intended to talk to you today about love stories. But at the end of this most marvellous week for Australian writing that began with Christos Tsiolkas winning the Commonwealth Writers Prize and has continued with this wonderful festival, it would be wrong of me to not talk about the attack that is presently being mounted on Australian writing.

Mad Dog Kemp was part of a sport in which boxers were expected to take falls and lose fights in order to benefit rich promoters. And at the moment, Australian writers and readers are being asked to take a fall in order that a few rich people get richer. And I don’t think we should be taking that fall, and tonight I want to talk about what strikes me as the rotten and stinking deal that is being proposed to us.

And so I’d like to begin with the word—if not quite at the beginning—then in the late fourth century AD, when St Jerome translated the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament into Latin. For the next thousand years St Jerome’s version, which became known as the Vulgate Bible, was *the* book.

But as Latin became not so much a lingua franca as a language of exclusion and privilege—a form of power in other words—the battle to know the great truth of that age in your own tongue—to hear the stories that mattered most in your own language and idiom—became inextricably bound up with the battle for freedom of thought and for freedom itself.

For good reason the Inquisitors’ first question of a suspected ‘heretic’ was always whether he knew any part of the Bible in his own tongue.

This battle begins in earnest with the birth of the printed word and the desire—punished throughout Europe by hideous death—to read *the* book, the Bible, not in Latin, the dead

tongue of the old imperium, but in the tongue of the field and town, the languages of the people —German, Dutch, French, Spanish.

In our language, this battle's greatest landmark is the publication in 1525 of William Tyndale's English translation of the Bible.

Though there had been English translations before, Tyndale, under the influence of Erasmus of Rotterdam, was the first to base his work not on corrupted Latin glosses, but return to the Hebrew and Greek originals, coupling his linguistic and literary gifts to a profound humanism.

'If God spares my life,' Tyndale said, 'I will cause the boy that drives the plow in England to know more of the Scriptures than the Pope himself!'

Tyndale introduced many phrases that the plowboy might comprehend—such as *the salt of the earth; let there be light, filthy lucre, fight the good fight*. But in tandem with such earthiness, he brought the poetry of the Hebrew original into the English language. And so we have not the best song, but the song of songs, not the best book, but the book of books. And he made changes that have transformed scripture into some of our greatest poetry.

By insisting, for example, that love—and not charity—was the correct interpretation of the original Greek in St Paul's Letter to the Corinthians 1: 13, we have that great poem that begins—

'If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.'

In this way, writes one scholar, Tyndale's Bible 'directed the language to a form of eloquence that became its paradigm'.

But this same English Bible was deemed heretical, and people caught distributing it were burnt at the stake. Nor did God spare Tyndale his life. Strangled at the stake, Tyndale was then also burnt.

But the liberating currents of his Bible were to bring fundamental change not just to English religion but to its politics, and more fundamentally and enduringly, to the language itself, his translation forming the basis for the definitive King James bible of 1611.

To make his bible accessible to the plow boy Tyndale had invented many new words, including *atonement* and *beautiful*. For such words many died, yet the moment this process begins, that time when we discover ourselves in our own vernacular, we gain something extraordinary in the merge, and we begin to invent ourselves anew.

For translating the Bible into English simultaneously gave what was a mongrel language a new authority and dignity, while investing the language with a grandeur, a poetry, and a sense of transcendence that was not just to inform English literature that followed, but in a fundamental sense also invent it.

The battle to understand this world in our own tongue that Tyndale's Bible represents, to make the universal particular, the sacred secular, and the secular in its turn sacred, is a battle that has strangely resurfaced here in Australia this year.

For it falls to us to once more to defend the right—our right and our deepest need—to our own stories in our own voice, which is also, historically and perhaps inevitably, that same battle between truth and power.

At this moment, as many of you would be aware, the Australian government is giving serious consideration to a proposal that would see the ending of territorial copyright for Australian writers.

This dullest and dreariest of phrases –territorial copyright—is the drab motley thrown over a measure which will do untold damage to Australian culture. I cannot begin to convey to you the destructive stupidity of what is being proposed, nor the intense sadness and great anger that so many Australian writers feel about this proposal.

At a recent dinner in New York with the leading publisher in the USA and a leading European publisher, the conversation came round to territorial copyright.

‘But why?’ asked the European publisher.

After all, territorial copyright for writers was fought for from the nineteenth century on, and was the basis for the rise over the last two hundred years of the novel as the great democratic art form.

The American publisher laughed, saying that while Australia’s folly would profit him, why on earth was Australian government contemplating such an insane idea that would destroy an industry and damage a vibrant literary culture?

Why indeed?

Even a few Manhattan blocks away from where the king of fraud, Bernie Madoff, flourished with his Ponzi rackets, people know it to be stupid idea fit only for the most credulous. But in Canberra, our Federal Government, which sometimes gives the appearance of being almost bizarrely hostile to Australian culture, is now giving serious consideration to destroying one of our greatest cultural success stories.

For publishing in Australia, though it has a history almost as old as European settlement, is effectively an industry less than forty years old. When in 1945 the Federal Government held a Commission of Enquiry into Australian publishing, it was told by Harold White, the Commonwealth Librarian, that Australia had no publishing industry. Australian readers were, said Gough Whitlam in 1964, ‘a captive British market, a subject people’.

Then something remarkable happened.

Against the odds, an Australian publishing industry came into being. The battle to build a worthwhile culture of writing and reading in a country so large with a market so small was extraordinarily difficult.

But Australian publishing over the last four decades is an extraordinary cultural achievement. In an era when national cultures suffered greatly from globalisation ours grew stronger, in no small part because of our book industry. We read Australian stories from cradle to grave, and the best of our writing is judged around the world as globally significant.

It is also an outstanding commercial success, a story that might warm the heart of the coldest free trader. Today we sell more books per capita than most nations. Our print runs of literary

novels are often the same in absolute terms as the USA or Britain. We export cook books, children's books, fantasy, thrillers, literature low and high, and every year more and more of our books are being published in more and more overseas territories.

And though the book industry returns in GST alone somewhere in the realm of \$75 million, it receives virtually no government support other than just \$6.7 million in Australia Council grants—much of which goes to other, smaller arts bureaucracies.

This is nothing like the over 100 million dollars of direct subsidy that the Australian film industry receives—to say nothing of the tens of millions more of taxpayer breaks Australian film receives on top of this. Yet Australian film is a cultural industry which, with very rare exceptions, unlike Australian books, struggles to find either critical success or any audience here or overseas.

I am not at all suggesting that our film industry shouldn't be supported. But on what logic is one industry supported on essentially cultural grounds to this extent, while another, which makes money and creates jobs and tax revenue and costs the tax payer almost nothing, threatened with destruction?

Unlike the car industry, the book industry receives neither tariff protection nor endless handouts. Yet, ABS figures suggest it employs 15,000 people directly—one quarter of what the car industry does. Unlike the forest industry it does not receive hundreds of millions in taxpayer subsidies, or the fossil fuel industry, which according to a recent NRMA report, receives \$10 billion in taxpayer subsidies. Yet it generates greater attention for Australia globally—all positive—than almost anything else we do culturally or economically.

The big end of town—Dymocks Booksellers in cahoots with Coles-Woolworths—are pushing for a change that will see jobs lost, a remarkable industry crippled and Australian cultural life dealt a body blow. Misleadingly called 'opening the market', it would allow the dumping of books by overseas publishers on the Australian market. Territorial copyright protection for Australian writers would cease to exist.

This alliance of wealth for profit has given itself the predictably deceitful title of the Coalition for Cheaper Books.

What they propose amounts to a return to the colonial days, not so old nor so distant as we perhaps thought, when Australian companies merely sold books from another country, and we bought with them notions of life that bore little relevance to our own world.

While the Coalition's proposal is opposed by everyone from Matthew Reilly to Tim Flannery to Tim Winton, from the Australian Booksellers Association to the Australian Publishers Association to the Children's Book Council of Australia, the only people the Coalition can wheel out in its defence, to plead its supposedly egalitarian case, are those horny handed sons of the proletariat, Alan Fels and, yes, Macquarie Banker Bob Carr, pedalling the fiction of privileged writers and grasping publishers opposing cheaper books for the masses.

It's all a bit like Fatty Vautin criticising a rape crisis centre for insensitivity to women.

Which may explain why Dymocks felt compelled to so shamefully manipulate its customers, using its e-mail subscriber lists to enlist support for its purported campaign for 'cheaper books'. Would the members of its 'Booklovers' group have felt so moved if they had been asked to support a proposal to make big business richer? And would Dymocks franchisees welcome a call by Australian writers to Australian readers to boycott Dymocks stores

because of this attack on Australian writing? That would be rightly condemned as destructive stupidity that will cost jobs—but then, what better description could be given to Dymocks' own dissembling campaign?

For it is the old lie —self serving elites versus the masses—that the true self serving elites used through the '90s to serve themselves ever more from the trough. For while the proposal may make money for a few big corporations whose power is already widely regarded as damaging and distorting in other retail fields, it is not even demonstrable that it will make books cheaper.

My most recent novel, *Wanting*, was published in Australia for \$35 and generally sold at \$30. Earlier this month it was published in the USA where it will sell for US\$24—or at 75 US cents to the Ozzie dollar, the exchange rate on the day of publication, Australian \$32. But if you add GST—\$3.20, the cost goes up to \$35.20.

Of course, it will be objected there is Amazon. And indeed there is. *Wanting* is discounted on Amazon to \$16.32. But there is a shipping charge to Australia of \$4.99, taking the cost up \$21.31, or at 75 US cents to the Ozzie dollar, \$28.45. Were GST to be added as it is here, applicable at full and not discounted retail cost, the figure comes to \$31.65—or more than the discounted price of my novel here.

But perhaps this isn't really about cheaper books at all.

Behind the rhetoric of cheaper books, the Coalition is about something else—a new sensibility among Australian book chains. Some among their number have come to believe that publishers have the whip hand over book chain retailers and that this is a situation now needs to be reversed., that this is a war, and it is a war that will be won by the book chain retailers.

They believe it will give them more power to force larger discounts off publishers and increase their own profit margin, while by destroying the viability of smaller competitors, allowing the major chains to increase their market share.

It is a mentality that comes out of Australian grocery retailing. There, according to a Price Waterhouse Coopers report in 2007, the Coles Woolworths duopoly control 80% of the national grocery retail market and are pushing aggressively into petrol and alcohol markets. The Coles Woolworths duopoly has the highest level of market dominance in grocery retail in the developed world.

Ria Voorhaar, spokeswoman for consumer watchdog *Choice*, was reported in *The Age* in 2007 saying shoppers were losing out due to the lack of competition.

'The duopoly' she said, 'is not doing consumers any favours when they go to the checkout.'

The aggressive push by Coles Woolworths into new retail areas such as liquor and petrol doesn't seem to be helping consumers there either.

Last year RACV petrol spokesman David Cumming was reported saying he was 'extremely worried about the huge market share' of the two retail giants in the petrol sector, while the NRMA claimed motorists were paying eight to 10 cents more for petrol because of the dominance of Coles and Woolworths service stations in NSW.

Nor is the Coles Woolworths duopoly doing any favour for producers. The Victorian Farmers' Federation, the Horticulture Australia Council and the Australian Beef Association all expressed concerns about the market power of Coles and Woolworths to the ACCC in 2008. A HAC survey showed 85 per cent of growers were unwilling to raise issues with major retailers 'for fear of retribution'.

As business journalist Michael West wrote in *The Age* in 2008—

'A bundle of evidence has emerged from the [ACCC] inquiry about the chains monsterring their competitors with town planning laws, and monsterring farmers because the farmers are forced to deal with them as they cannot go elsewhere - such is the dominance of Woolies and Coles.'

West went on to say—

'The push into liquor by Coles and Woolies has left them so dominant in grog retailing that Lion and Foster's are held to ransom on prices. You want us to stock that wine or that new ale? Sorry, we'll have to pay this very low price for it. There's a lot of wine and ale around.

'There is a case for legislative relief. The Government could pass antitrust legislation as has been done in US, Canada and the UK.'

Yet West concludes this is unlikely.

'Competition policy has failed,' he writes. 'It is too late.'

This then is the ghost of Christmas future that now haunts Australian writers and readers.

To trust companies like Coles and Woolworths, companies with this sort of record, with the Australian book industry, is like inviting the Taliban to babysit the Obama children. No one should express surprise with what ensues.

One might have thought the Rudd government would be keen to rein in the excesses and distortions consequent on such a duopoly, to wind back its power. But no, far from it. Courage does not seem to have spent an evening lately at the Lodge. Rather, to placate the cruel gods of commerce, the reform the Rudd Government is considering is feeding the monster more victims.

The concentration of ownership of book retailing in the hands of one or two chains as in Britain and the USA has been catastrophic for the book industries in those countries.

The Australian book retail sector—with its strong and varied mix of independents, chains and discount department stores—is regarded as one of the healthiest and most diverse in the world, enabling large volume, large variety and price competition.

Yet many independent booksellers believe the ending of territorial copyright will lead to the further closure of independent bookstores, concentrating bookselling further into the hands of the discount department stores owned by Coles and Woolworths, and the larger retail chains, which have a record of often charging above the recommended retail price for books and even discriminating actively against small publishers.

Australian independent bookstores have for decades supported the unknown Australian writers, built the audience for books for us all, from David Malouf to Christos Tsiolkas, backed the Chloe Hoopers and Joan Londons, reminded us why Helen Garner mattered and

Don Watson was important, persuaded us to buy a first Australian book by a Nam Le or a Steve Toltz. They are also the path into which books from elsewhere that matter are introduced to this country, and keep our book culture from becoming gangrenous. Their future under this proposal is bleak indeed.

Writers and books that matter will become like an endangered species with no habitat left to support them. The fate of most of them in the large chain and discount mega store culture will be that of marsupials in new outer suburbs, dicing with death on freeways, not knowing until that short moment of blinding light dazzle that this is no longer their home.

Of course, as the Coalition for Cheaper Books—or, as we might more accurately call it, the Coalition for Bigger Business—would point out, that's not the whole story.

This is.

What is being proposed doesn't exist in Europe or the USA. And even if US and British publishers are allowed to dump books on our market, Australian publishers will not be allowed to do the same in theirs.

In the one country in the world where the change was introduced, New Zealand, publishing has, according to the New Zealand Publishers Association, suffered, and books are now more expensive.

Bookselling in America, like Australia, runs on a consignment system. Where it differs is that return rates there are typically 50%. These returned, unsold books are generally pulped or remaindered—sold off for one or two dollars, the author receiving no payment. Under this proposal these returned books will now be able to be dumped on the Australian market like Italian canned tomatoes.

Thus even a hugely successful Tim Winton novel—a book that enables his publisher here, Penguin Australia, to nurture new Australian writers of talent—could end up in Australian remainder bins. A dumped US hardback of *Breath* would be far cheaper than an Australian paperback, but with no royalty payable to the author and no profit to their Australian publisher.

The effects of this would be two fold: it would ultimately force major Australian writers to publish out of the USA to protect their own interests, with all the sorry consequences that would entail, while it would see the destruction of support for the next generation of Tim Wintons as Australian publishers went to the wall, or survived as they did for the best part of two centuries, as distributors for imperial wares made elsewhere for others.

It is true that books are made more cheaply in the USA in part because they pay writers less. While the royalty on an Australian paperback is between 10 and 12.5%, in the USA it is 7.5%. Thus once Australian writers are compelled to again publish for Australia from New York, they will effectively have taken between a 25 and 33% pay cut, a sacrifice for *laissez faire* economics that Macquarie Bob may wish to publicly emulate. And yet, even after ripping writers off, US book prices are often no cheaper.

At the same time, Australian publishing suffers the problem—and considerable costs—of a small market spread over a huge land. Every major Australian publisher maintains a large sale force. And yet books here are no more expensive.

My Dutch publisher, Ambo-Anthos, highly successful, employs just one sales rep. And yet, come this September, the Dutch paperback of *Wanting* will go on sale for €19.95—or, (at 54eurocents to the Ozzie dollar) Australian \$36.92. The Australian paperback, to be published in the same month, will sell for \$24.95.

The Coalition for Cheaper Books makes several arguments that are simply untrue. They argue that ‘there is no connection between the business of importing and distributing international books and the business of publishing Australian books.’

If this were true how do they explain the success of, for example, Australia’s most successful independent publisher, Allen and Unwin. A large part of its business comes from overseas titles such as the Harry Potter series, but these profits are ploughed back into its outstanding Australian list, featuring such Australian writers as Andrew McGahan, Christos Tsiolkas and Michelle de Kretser.

The Coalition argues that there will be a greater diversity of books available under this proposal. But as large publishers believe it will compel them to reduce their Australian lists, as small publishers believe it could push them to the wall, and independent booksellers—those bookshops that stock the diversity of books consumers want—believe it will damage their trade and close shops, what will happen is a significant reduction in the diversity of books available to the Australian consumer.

Or does Bob Carr think Big-W will stock the complete Gore Vidal just for him? For there may be more American celebrity books, and dumped best sellers going as red light specials, but that will be it. Given the pricing of overseas books, the practice of large chains and the experience of New Zealand, it is likely that a less competitive retail and publishing environment will make books generally more expensive.

And as a nation, and a society, we will be back forty years ago to when we were a colony of mind, with the money we spend on books going overseas.

The Coalition argues the Australian publishing industry ‘will continue to grow’ because it ‘is a dynamic industry driven by local demand. People want to read about their country, its peoples, its history and its prospects.’

If this were true, why was this demand not met for most of the last two centuries when Australians were force-fed a pottage of English books?

And the answer is, because that’s what made money for the big English publishers, as this proposal, as the American publisher observed, will now make money for him.

Bob Carr doesn’t believe this though.

On ‘Lateline’, in response to a question about how the ending of national copyright might lead to less Australian writing being published, he said:

‘I have never heard such garbage spoken as this. I have heard a lot of garbage in my time. The fact is Australians will always want to read Australian stories. Can the publishers point to a single title they’ve put into print as a subsidy for Australian writers. In other words a title that they know is not going to make a profit but which they’re putting out into the market as a favour to Australian culture.’

At this point I'd like to share with you one of Australian publishing's odd secrets, something no publisher, I suspect, would say publicly. I've been published in my time by three major Australian publishers—Penguin, Pan Macmillan, and Random House—all subsidiaries of international companies, yet each fiercely proud and supportive of their Australian writers.

In every company every year there were Australian books that were published that everyone knew would not make money. And they were published because those publishers believed that this Australian book mattered. That this Australian writer mattered. That this Australian story should be heard. That these Australian poems, these Australian essays, this Australian novel should be read.

But they didn't do it as a favour to Australian culture, or the writer, or to anyone or anything. They did it because they intuitively understood that their role was not just making money, necessary as that was. Because as well as being a business, every Australian publishing house I know of sees itself as part of Australian culture. Publishing companies are not millionaires' factories for anyone involved and Australian culture is not an abstract term for them: it is what they do. It is who they are.

And despite what some in the chain book retailers think, the Australian book industry is not yet a war zone.

The Australian book industry is for the most part a series of collaborations and partnerships. I am not pretending that there aren't differences or battles, that it isn't competitive, that tough business isn't done. But my experience is that the industry is most successful when writer works with publisher and publishers with booksellers in all their forms to sell books. My experience is that there are many good people at every level and in every size and aspect of the book business who believe in books as something more than mere product.

One might think that if the Federal Government were serious about creating free trade, if they really wanted a level playing field, that they would either take the GST off books sold in Australia, or oblige Amazon to charge it at source, as Amazon does for other countries and several US states to which it ships.

Taking GST off books ought be seriously considered as an economic stimulus that would create jobs, stimulate sales, and act as a considerable fillip to our literary culture. If the Coalition for Bigger Business is genuine about Australians having cheaper books they would come out and back one of these measures. But that won't happen, because this isn't about cheaper books at all.

It is the final sorry issue of big end of town greed coupling with starry eyed free trade ideologues in government who, knowing nothing of the market, believe in its genius only working when fully unfettered. The same combination, in other words, of corporate greed and political naivety that has given us the greatest economic crisis since the Depression.

Kevin Rudd has famously declared, 'that the great neo-liberal experiment of the past 30 years has failed,' going on to say that, 'Ironically, it falls to social democracy to prevent liberal capitalism from cannibalising itself.'

But does he mean any of it?

For it falls to Kevin Rudd to explain exactly why his government is now seriously contemplating exactly the sort of cannibalism that he so publicly railed against.

And if his government sanctions this proposal it will fall to Kevin Rudd to explain not just to Australia, but to the world, what sort of nation he wishes to lead that would seek to destroy rather than support and develop its writing?

For what nation can advance with its tongue torn out?

Maybe this proposal will benefit its sponsors, Dymocks and Coles and Woolworths. But it will not the Australian people. They will pay more for books made elsewhere in the image of others. There will be less Australian books. There will be a slow dieback of Australian literature that will be as sad in its way as the dying of the Murray or the Great Barrier Reef. There will be less jobs in publishing, bookselling, and printing, something else Kevin Rudd and his economic ministers claim to be concerned about.

And for those Australian writers who do not do what they had to do for the best part of two centuries—leave for exile in the US and Europe—there will be even less chance of surviving in a country that perhaps values its writers and book culture less than any other in the western world.

That for a short time Australian book culture had been one of the more inventive, vibrant and exciting literatures in the world, will be the cause for wistful wonder, rather than the foundation of a dream of the different country we might have been. And for that we'll be able to thank Bob Carr and his mates and think of how only Bernie Madoff got away with selling a bigger fantasy.

For this reason, there is at the heart of this battle a great sadness. There is a new philistinism abroad. The cold contempt which it reveals some in power to have for a creative community that has done so much for this country is despicable.

It is therefore not enough that we defeat this pernicious job, wealth and culture destroying proposal. Because unless we propose something better, something worse will eventuate and Australian writing faces a future defined not by its achievements, but by the interest of the rorters and racketeers, those who fleece and fly. We'll be taking the fall again and again for the promoters that Mad Dog Kemp always warned about.

I began by speaking about the battle six centuries ago to have the Bible published in the language of the people, and I spoke of the right—our right—to our own voice, which was also, historically, the battle between truth and power.

Once more, that battle to want to know stories that matter in your own idiom flies in the face of a dominant orthodoxy, this time a theology of the abacus rather than that of the cross.

We can prostrate ourselves to the abacus, tear out our tongues, and end up as a banging gong, a clanging cymbal. Or we can with love seize our language, our stories, and with them make ourselves anew.

Because none of this would be just a reflection of who we are, but a reinvention of ourselves that never ends. That is the great and historic possibility that now presents itself to Kevin Rudd, a possibility that allows his government to show that it is not just one more empty vessel; that it is brave and that is visionary, and that it wishes to build on our strengths, our creative talents to make Australian literature one of the world's great emerging literatures of the 21st century.

Kevin Rudd can do more than just reject the measure to end territorial copyright. He can turn around, recognise the centrality of Australian writing to Australia, and offer something large and positive in its place. He could make explicit national support for Australian stories told in Australian voices. Is this too much? I think not; it is, after all, exactly what Canada has for its writers.

And then, building on that clarity, create a raft of measures, programmes, laws and institutions all with the purpose of supporting Australian writers telling Australian stories. We could for example have a national book commission charged with developing the book industry, that takes over the grant work of the Australia Council's poorly financed literature board, but has a broader and larger role.

It should on a much larger scale instigate well funded, comprehensive measures that aid and develop small publishers, that assist in book distribution, maintain retail diversity, that build professional standards in editing, design and publishing, and develop book culture. That fosters exports and creates international attention for Australian writers. That ensures Australian literature becomes a central, rather than peripheral part of our humanities teaching at secondary and tertiary level. That ensures Australian writing benefits rather than suffers from the new technologies, and prospers in a twittering world of e-books and e-commerce.

For the last quarter of a century we had a politics, an economy and a society that had as their central dreaming a certain idea of life as being reduced to a fiction of a free market. I say fiction pointedly. We are after all a species defined by above all other things our capacity for reflecting, diving and creating anew our world through story.

The free market was a cocaine rush of a story, a blast of confidence and belief that fortuitously coincided with the collapse of a rival utopian tale, Communism. It gave unprecedented economic growth to the world, delivered millions from poverty and famine.

But at the beginning of this millennium it has become apparent that it also is running out of time: that it led us also to epidemics of depression, to ceaseless, unwinnable wars, to an economic malaise and environmental despair. Today more people live in poverty than in any time in human history. Today the land and the sea are under assault from a climate system stressed and unstable. We need new stories. We need the capacity to make those stories. And to do that we need to come together— readers, writers, politicians.

But as in Tyndale's time, we will need to stand up for such things to happen, for the ongoing right to hear our stories in our voice. And in time I hope we in Australia may even find our own words as remarkable as those words *beautiful* and *atonement*, new words that not just describe but create a new country and people coming into being, an idea for our language in the shape of these words and the worlds that come forth from them, words and worlds it remains our shared possibility to make and our future glory to know.

Thank you for coming to listen to me.