Caro Llewellyn

The Hunger for Ideas

Literary festivals have become a regular feature of the Australian cultural landscape. In fact, they're everywhere. Each state has one; even small regional towns have them. They vary in their success and in the numbers they attract. But while they are generally popular with readers, literary festivals can be problematic. Sometimes the private experience of writing and reading can clash with the public forum of the literary festival. But, all in all, I think they're an important and happy sign of the intellectual and moral health of the nation.

I'd like to start my discussion with where it all began, 44 years ago in Adelaide, with a celebration of reading and writing called Adelaide Writers' Week. In fact, Adelaide's writers' week was, as far as I can tell, the very first event of its kind in the world. The other great festivals are surprisingly young in comparison. The Edinburgh International Book Festival, for example, is 25, the same age as Canada's Harbourfront International Festival of Authors. In Australia, the Melbourne Writers' Festival is a teenager, and the Sydney Writers' Festival is just a young one at seven.

But Adelaide led the way. Authors loved it, and the crowds came in their droves to sit on plastic chairs under two white tents in the Pioneer Women's Memorial Gardens to listen to their favourite authors read from and discuss their work.

Adelaide Writers' Week is a pioneer so its setting of the Pioneer Women's Gardens seems all the more appropriate with its history. Since its inception in 1960 it has been host to numerous high-profile authors, including Ted Hughes, Salman Rushdie, Julian Barnes, Jeanette Winterson and many more. Their guest list reads like the who's who of twentieth century literature. All the greats have stood on stages in Adelaide's famous tents in that incredible March heat, sweltering, but giving their hearts to their readers and listeners.

I grew up going to Adelaide Writers' Week. At first I can't say I was an enthusiastic participant. Rather, I was a drag along. I was told to sit still, be quiet and stop fidgeting. My mother, a poet, thought it would be good for my constitution or, perhaps, my soul to sit in 40 degree heat and listen to people talk about big ideas and literature at the age of five. Or perhaps she just couldn't find a suitable babysitter. Well, it was good for me, and I think it was the beginning of a life-long love affair with books and reading. It was also the beginning of my love of literary festivals.

Listening to the particular cadence of the voice of a writer whose work you love - hearing the timbre of their voice, the tilt, their accent - can all add to the reading experience. Listening to Andrew O'Hagan reading from his work, which is as much about language and nationalism as it is about anything, was a mesmerising experience at the 2003 Melbourne Writers' Festival. With his

voice in your ear, you can read him and his oh-so Scottish characters so much the better.

Recently I heard Julian Barnes read a short story from *The Lemon Table* and I, along with the 40 other people in the room, was spellbound. He had us all in the palm of his hand as we took that train trip with the actor and the writer. He knew we were totally in his awe, and he read like no-one I have ever heard before. When I later re-read that story, it was at a totally different pace. I read it completely differently. It was as though he were on my shoulder saying, 'Hush down now. Stop and go gently with that passage.' After hearing him read I have his voice as my guide to his books.

Recently, somebody told me that they hadn't realised what a funny writer the Pulitzer Prize winner Richard Ford was until they heard him read. Passages they had taken in soberly from *The Sportswriter*, they realised, were in fact hilarious. Frank Bascombe is many things, but funny he is too. One doesn't necessarily think of Ford as a humourist, but I think once you've heard him you know it's an essential part of his writing.

Of course, not everyone is a great reader or performer or can be articulate about their work in a one-on-one conversation let alone in front of 500 people. Writers, on the whole, are better able to articulate their craft than, say, the average painter. (Edward Hopper once said that if you could say it in words there'd be no reason to paint.) Even so, not every writer is a born speaker, and nor should they have to be. What they owe to us, their readers, is to write beautifully, meaningfully and with commitment to their art and their craft. They don't owe us anything beyond that. They don't have to come and talk to us about the intention of their work or how they deliver what we as readers take home and devour with hunger, enjoyment or thrill once it hits the bookshelves.

The relationship between writers and readers is fascinating because both reading and writing are solitary acts. It's as if the writer comes out of their locked room and hands each of us individually their precious work, which we in turn then take to our own private spaces.

Having said that, I love the public forum of literary festivals. However, I do have some reservations when it comes to listening to writers talk about their work. What if you have truly loved a book, come along to a festival line-up to hear the author speak, and then go away having something that you thought magical about their work explained as a trick or technique. There's also the point that what we as readers take from books is not always what the author intended, and having the message explained can take away some of the intrigue or passion you had for a book. And then, of course, there are the times when you go to hear one of your heroes, and the sound of their voice ruins it for you. Sometimes, I think, a book should just be a book, read in the privacy of your own cocoon and left there for you to turn over in your mind like pebbles in your hand.

However, literary festivals aren't always entirely satisfying for the authors either. Take the example of the 2003 public appearance in the UK by one of the world's greatest living writers, Paul Auster. It was the only public event he'd agreed to give in the UK to promote his new book. Anything Auster does is special, but this was a rare opportunity. (Needless to say, I have been trying to get Auster to Sydney since I started.)

Auster was interviewed by the editor of a major reputable literary newspaper. The editor's first question: 'So, I'm wondering if you could tell me, Paul,

where do your ideas come from?'

If I was Auster, at that point I would have stood up and walked out, throwing some suitably acerbic quip over my shoulder. The opportunity to ask Paul Auster about his work is like being granted three wishes from a genie in a bottle, and that editor completely wasted one of those precious wishes. How Auster remained in good humour following that question is a mystery, but he went on to turn a trite question into an interesting answer, which really shows the measure of the man.

Festivals are certainly not always easy for writers. How someone who has been on the road for literally months talking about their latest book can remain fresh and enthusiastic about their work is something to be admired. Reading the same passage over and over again to audiences all around the world and making it sound heartfelt each time is not a simple task. I once spoke to Augusten Burroughs about this issue. Burroughs wrote a wonderful memoir called *Running With Scissors* about a very dysfunctional family and a truly barbaric upbringing, which was a bestseller around the world. Since then he's had two more books published. I caught him as he was packing his bags for his American author tour, which was going to see him travelling for three solid months. That was before he had even left the country to come here or to the UK to talk to his readers on this side of the globe. I'm sure he's not complaining - he is by now, no doubt, a very wealthy young man - but every one of those audiences wanted him to be smiling, funny and endearing and for him to tell them the story about how his crazy adopted parent examined his morning bowel movements at the kitchen table. They wanted him to tell it *as if it was the first time*. They wanted the story to sound fresh for them.

When DBC Pierre was here in 2004, he was continually asked about the now famous incident where he sold his friends' house and made off with all the cash. I'm not sure that I would be able to keep responding cheerfully to questions about my moral code or whether or not I was a scoundrel and whether or not I had actually paid back all the money with interest. I was only with him part of the time and he must have responded at least ten times to those kinds of questions in my presence alone and yet every time he was polite and generous with his response. Arguably, he has offered himself as a public figure and thus subjected himself to the possibility of public scrutiny, but the problem is that in this focus on the personality, his beautiful and powerful book gets lost.

The last thing I'll say about the problem with literary festivals is perhaps the one that I, as a director of a literary festival, find personally most difficult. The problem is that festivals and promotion and all those things that authors are now called on to do - and I am very much a part of all this - takes authors away from the main game. In a funny way, you could say it stops them writing, except that it's not really that funny if you think about it.

It took Louis de Bernieres ten years to write something after the amazing success of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. I don't want to be overly simplistic about this because there are many reasons for that period of time passing, one of which was that he felt like *Corelli* was a sword of Damocles hanging over his head and wondered after the incredible success of that book if he could ever write unselfconsciously again. Yet another real impediment was his gruelling schedule. Even though *Corelli* was ten years old, Louis was on the road almost constantly. When can you find time to write when you are out there flogging your wares? Of course, he could say no, but for so many different reasons (including contractual ones) that's not always easy.

When an author says to me, 'I'm really sorry, Caro, I can't come to your festival because I'm in the middle of a new book', I confess that I take on a Jekyll and Hyde persona. As director of the Sydney Writers' Festival, I'm hugely disappointed, but as Caro Llewellyn, passionate reader and booklover, I'm completely thrilled.

Having laid out all of those writers' festival dilemmas, I want to comment on the hunger for ideas that drives literary festivals.

There is no doubt that literary festivals are becoming more and more popular. They're also all competing against one other. Yet, for the most part, there appear to be enough audiences to go around. Adelaide Writers' Week had 104,000 in 2004. Even though Adelaide has huge tents to accommodate the crowds, people still couldn't get in to hear their favourite authors. Even the areas outside and around the tents were filled with bodies. Not even in her wildest dreams would Rose Wight, the director of that festival, have expected so many people to come. In 2003 we had a similar problem, although on a smaller scale. Hundreds of people sat outside the sessions on the wharf listening to what was going on inside through hastily erected speakers.

For festival directors, it's certainly a good 'problem' to have. But beyond that, it's also a good sign of our nation's cultural vitality. What would a lack of interest in literary festivals say about us as a nation?

Of course, I'm delighted that in 2004 we had 22% growth and sold more than $150,000 worth of books. I'm thrilled that more than 500 people wanted to come hear David Marr and Marian Wilkinson talk about The Tampa crisis in a room that only holds 250 people. I'm astounded that across all of our events, we were at 84% capacity. I was so happy to see that 200 people climbed out of their beds on a Sunday morning to come to hear six German and six Australian poets read their work. All of these things certainly make my job easier. With figures like that we have sponsors approaching us and saying they want to give us money. We have authors saying, yes, of all the festivals in Australia, yours is the one I want to do. There is a buzz with the public, in the media and we have critical mass. But, moreover, I'm happy because of what it says about Australia. It says that despite what we might look like from the outside (with the re-election of John Howard that year), there are hundreds and thousands of people who want to know, who are hungry for ideas and debate and knowledge, and who aren't happy to settle for the black and white view of things presented to them in the media or by our politicians.

Clive Hamilton, a guest at the 2003 Festival, said that if you want to know what's really happening in the world, you need to read, not newspapers, but books. This is not only because increasingly the worldview you get from newspapers is agenda-driven, but also because the world is too complex a place these days to be simplified down to a headline and a quarter-page article.

I'm happy that at festivals you still see that people want to dream and imagine and be taken to places they've never been with characters they'll want to keep with them for forever. I'm happy that at festivals we can argue, thrash out, ruminate, ponder and pontificate. It all says that, as a nation, we are alive and interested and open to possibilities.

I want to finish, though, where I began, with a five-year-old child sitting in a hot tent listening to people talk about things of which she had little understanding. Back in those days nobody thought to feature children's book writers at their events. That's a very recent inclusion in festival programs, but

it's a crucial one. Without children and young people at our events, our future is pretty bleak.

I think it would be pretty safe to say that Sydney's audience is the most diverse of any of the Australian literary festivals and that's something - even more than figures and bums on seats - that I'm proud of. Seeing a sea of ten year olds lined up to see their favourite author at 9.30 on Saturday morning and then queuing up to buy their books and have them signed is truly something to put a smile on your face. The chances are that it's for them what it was for me: the beginning of something life-long and life-sustaining - a love affair with books.

Caro Llewellyn has published three books with Random House: Jobs for the Girls: Women Talk about Running a Business of their Own*;* Fresh! Market People and their Food*; and* My One True Love*. She is the artistic director of the Sydney Writers' Festival.*

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