

# Writers in Conversation

Christobel Mattingley, Rosanne Hawke and Anne Bartlett spoke about writing at a session at the 21st ANZTLA Conference held in Adelaide, 13-16 July 2006.

## Christobel Mattingly

*Christobel Mattingley began writing when she was eight and her first children's book, The Picnic Dog, was published in 1970. She now has 45 published titles, 42 children's books and three adult non-fiction, many of which have been shortlisted, awarded, or translated. The Miracle Tree was Christian Children's Book of the Year in 1985 and runner up for Christian Book of the Year. Many of her stories are about marginalised people, refugees in the Asmir trilogy, the unemployed in The Sack and Work Wanted, a hearing impaired child in The Race, someone affected by atomic bombing in The Miracle Tree, and an Aboriginal community in Tucker's Mob. Appointed by a South Australian Aboriginal committee as editor/researcher for their history, she wrote the groundbreaking Survival in Our Own Land, now in its 4th edition. She is currently working with the Maralinga people to help them tell the story of the last 50 years since atomic testing took place in their country. In 1995 she received the rare honour of an inaugural Honorary Doctor of the University of South Australia for her contribution to literature and social justice, and in 1996 was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for the same reasons. Her latest book is Nest Egg: A Clutch of Poems.*

When my first book, *The Picnic Dog*, written in 1965, was published in 1970, people said to me, "Writing! What a nice hobby to have!" They did not know that it had first had 7 rejections and that on receiving the first one I felt as if the bottom had dropped out of my world. When my second book, *Windmill at Magpie Creek*, was Runner Up for the Children's Book of the Year Award in 1972, there were no copies in Australian bookshops, because the English publisher had consigned stock on a French ship, *Le Kangourou*, which lay, cargo in the hold, under a black ban from Sydney wharves for 6 months, because of the French atomic testing in the Pacific. But people still said, "Writing!

What a nice hobby to have!" Now 36 years later, with 45 books published, someone at the church where we have been worshipping for almost 50 years, said to me few weeks ago, "Writing! What a nice hobby to have!"

But writing never has been just a hobby for me. It has been a calling. I have been blessed with a golden life and writing is my way of giving back. It is, I realised a long time ago, my vocation, reaching out in love to people I shall never know. As St Paul said, there are many gifts, and writing is the gift I was given. But gifts may come at a price, and writing, especially for children, carries a heavy responsibility.

It brings many rewards, however, which money cannot buy, and I am humbled and deeply moved by responses from many readers who have been touched by my books.

I was born in the middle of the Great Depression in 1931 at Brighton, South Australia. on what I know now to be Kaurna land, very close to the important Tjilbruke Dreaming Trail. Like many writers, I started writing when I was eight - poems in my mother's recipe book and later a nature diary. I did not know it then of course, but looking back now I can see how God was already gently leading me and preparing me for future writing. I always had an awareness of the Creator and a deep love of nature, and my first published pieces at the age of ten were in the children's pages of the nature magazine *Wild*.

Some stories you know for a long time you will write one day — when you have lived long enough. Others take you by surprise and demand to be written immediately. In the 1970s, after a particularly bruising response from a publisher I trusted, I was unable to write another story for years.

As our older son was a young journalist I was listening to the news every hour in case one of his stories was in the bulletin. And the seemingly never-ending catalogue of the world's woes somehow sapped the hope which is an integral part of writing for children. It was a time of great loneliness and unhappiness. But I still had to write and poems pouring out of me again wherever I was, were my lifeline. But writing only poems made me feel guilty because writing is for sharing and there's not a big market for poems. Much later, long after I had written *The Miracle Tree*, I realised that period had been part of the way God had prepared me for writing it. Our daughter had gone to Japan to study for 3 years on a postgraduate scholarship, so we went in the first December holidays to find

out what life was about for her. Because Christianity had been introduced into Japan at Nagasaki I asked if we could spend Christmas there. And on Christmas night to my amazement, never having expected to write anything but postcards in Japan, I found I had a story — inspired by a gardener whom we had noticed that morning and the exquisite little pine tree he was so lovingly tending. The previous day in the Epicentre Park beneath a bare tree blossoming with paper cranes. we had seen a little plaque to a Japanese woman poet severely debilitated by radiation sickness who had died not long before. Somehow that gardener, that tree and the woman gave me a story. When we returned to Tokyo a month later I read in the English language newspaper that fellow writers had just gathered to continue the campaign she had conducted for the rest of her agonising life, to outlaw nuclear weapons.

*Survival in Our Own Land* was another book I had never expected to write. But in 1983, just when I was writing a historical novel (which I have now never finished, alas! — it was about a major mine disaster in Tasmania in 1912!), I was asked by Aboriginal people to help them produce their own book, telling their side of the 150 years since British and German settlers arrived. I knew it would be the most difficult task I had ever undertaken. But I could never have realised just how difficult — how traumatic the stories, how haunting the photographs, how angry and desolate most of the informants, how highhanded and bullying the bureaucrats, how bungling the printer, how mendacious the Premier, how alienated I would become in my own society. Twelve times an hour as I struggled on 17 hours a day, seven days a week, I would repeat Paul's affirming verse from Philippians 4:13. "I can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me." And at times when I hardly knew where to turn next for support as the book became a political football and the Aboriginal people were

deprived of their ownership of it, someone I didn't even know would phone or write or intervene to help in some way. God's hand was indeed on that book. It is now in its 4th edition. It has affirmed identity for countless Aboriginal people - many have found family through it - and informed even more non-Aboriginal Australians of the true history of our nation's beginnings. "White Australia has a Black history" as the NAIDOC Week slogan so succinctly declared two decades ago.

I was so burnt out by those 8 years, I wondered if I would ever write again. But God had His plans — another story, this time a happy one, *King of the Wilderness*. It seemed by chance I met legendary bushman and naturalist Deny King, who lived in Tasmania's remote South West for 50 years, where no roads go even today, and he asked me to help him record his life. He died before we could begin and over the next ten years I read his diaries, and gathered his story from others who had known him far longer than I. It was a rich experience, forming many new friendships.

I believe the Holy Spirit inspires my writing. Five more books came about by His direct intervention. Why else would I have woken up one night, after choosing school lunch treats for our weekly parcel for the church grocery collection for needy families that afternoon, knowing that I had to write a story about a family whose father lost his job? I woke up knowing the title — *The Sack*, and the opening paragraph. Why else would I have woken up one night in hospital in Vienna after spinal surgery two days earlier, knowing I had to write about a refugee family our son had helped to escape from the conflict in Bosnia? I knew the title — *No Gun for Asmir*, and again I knew the first paragraph.

Just after the publisher decided to let *The Sack* go out of print, I received letters from two Adelaide schools, asking for a sequel. I showed them to my publisher,

who just happened to be visiting Adelaide, and she said, "Well, Christobel, can you do it?" Suddenly, although I had never thought about it before, I knew I could. And when I came to do it, it came easily, because to be true to the situation, I had not given *The Sack* a tidy, happy ending, with everything resolved. It was the same with *No Gun for Asmir*. Because no one knew whether Asmir's father, Muris, was dead or alive when I finished the story, I had to leave it open ended. I was flooded with letters — thousands of them — from readers wanting to know how the family was faring. "When are you going to write Asmir 2?" the children wrote. "How's he getting on at school?" "When are you going to write Muris Escapes?" adults wanted to know. *No Gun for Asmir* proved to be the key for Muris and he did escape. So I found myself writing *Escape from Sarajevo* and *Asmir in Vienna*.

As well as passion, writing from the heart, believing in your story even if no one else does, you have to have patience, perseverance and persistence to be a writer. Because I wanted Aboriginal children to have a book of their own, after being in the Bamyili, now Barunga, community in the NT, where the children took me to their hearts, I found myself writing *Tucker's Mob*. But it took 13 and a half years to find a publisher interested in a story about an Aboriginal family. When it was launched here in Adelaide at an Aboriginal school, Nelson Vareoe, a Kurna elder, said, "I've waited all my life for a book like this." It is now translated into 4 Aboriginal languages.

It was 19 and a half years before *The Race* was published. Then it became an Honour book! *The Chink in the Great Grey Wall*, a story I wrote while in residence in 1999 at the Fremantle Children's Literature Centre in WA, is still awaiting publication. The Centre is in the hospital of the notorious, now closed Fremantle gaol, scene of deaths in custody for several Aboriginal men. One was a poet, Robbie Walker,

whose work I included in *Survival in Our Own Land*. Another, artist Ted Crow, imprisoned far from home, painted his Kimberley country on any scrap of paper or cardboard he could find.

After recovering from bowel cancer at the end of 2002, I wondered what my unfinished business was. In a conversation with a publisher I suddenly realised in a Damascus-road-like revelation that it was my husband's story of his WW2 years as a young pilot. It has taken three years to find a publisher interested in it,

and I believe that may be because of the strong thread of faith running through it, which undergirded him through those horrendous times. Now I am working with the Maralinga people to help them tell their story of the 50 years since the British and Australian governments began atomic testing on their lands.

Last year, 65 years since my first poems were rejected by my school magazine, *Nest Egg: a Clutch of Poems* was published. Writers don't retire.



## Rosanne Hawke

*Rosanne Hawke was born in Penola in South Australia, and was an aid worker in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates with The Evangelical Alliance Mission for 10 years. She is a descendant of the Cornish diaspora and writes about young people. Her twelfth book, Soraya the Storyteller, was shortlisted in the 2006 Festival Awards and the 2005 Australian CBC Awards. Across the Creek won the Cornish 2005 Holyer an Gof awards. Rosanne holds an Asialink Residency to write in Pakistan in 2006. She teaches "Writing for Children" at Adelaide TAFE and Tabor Adelaide and has a PhD in creative writing from the University of Adelaide.*

Even though I dreamed of being a writer as a child, Pakistan was where I started writing seriously. One night when we were working there as aid workers with TEAM, an interdenominational mission, my daughter asked me to tell her a story. One of our friends had been kidnapped by freedom fighters in Afghanistan and she wanted a story about an Australian girl being kidnapped by a young Afghan freedom fighter. She asked me to write it down and that story became *Jihad* in the trilogy *Borderland*. My daughter turned me into a writer.

So much of my writing has grown from living totally in the culture in the Middle East—learning language, wearing national clothes, shopping, sharing in weddings, funerals, travelling in the mountains,

feeling so enclosed by the landscape. There was magic, beauty, rawness of life, kindness from the people, but what I missed most was the feeling of space I had as a child growing up in the semi outback in Central Queensland.

I am inspired by something that happens to me, or by something that I may not understand, and so I write a novel to explore it. The research for the novel becomes my own journey, the things the hero may learn are often things that I learn through writing the book, or the way the hero becomes may be something I secretly wish I was like. For example, I felt the displacement coming back to Australia from Pakistan just as I did when we returned from Queensland when I was 14; it found its way into

*Re-entry.* Researching family history, finding a cultural identity and exploring a relationship with an Indigenous person turned up in *Zenna Dare*.

Joel Billings in *The Keeper and Sailmaker* is learning to control his mind. He's attacked, he lashes out, but Dev Eagle, the biker, helps him see the battle is in his head. Joel finds that if he can fight his battles inside (whether they be worries or feelings about someone), and stop the fighting there, he gets along a lot better with other people. I am still learning that one too.

Often stories come from the research I've done. When I found out in the little Edithburgh museum the old story behind the 'ghost' in the Troubridge lighthouse, I had to put it in a story. I read the old keeper's log and also an article by Max Fatchen. Joel finds an old tinny in the bay and the mystery of it parallels the story of the lost lighthouse keepers.

*Wolfchild* grew out of research too. I read the legend of the *Lost Land of Lyonesse* and was captivated. Many believe it was a special land – the Cornish called it Lethowsow. The romantic poets began calling it Lyonesse, with stories about King Arthur's burial place being there. In the Cornish legend, the last man to reach the coast of Cornwall alive before the land was flooded, escaped on his white horse. He had the same name as my family, Trevelyan, and to this day the Trevelyan family have on their coat of arms a white horse rising up out of the sea. This fascinated me so that I had to write about it.

*Across the Creek* grew out of Cornish folklore. I read a story about a Cornish boy who was lured into a dark grove and was shown an underground cavern with crystal pillars. When I was walking round the Kapunda mine, I thought of a boy called Aidan who finds a strange land within the mine. Lost children is a

big theme in Australia, and in *Across the Creek*, children have been lost for centuries in Aidan's town, including his friend, Jenice the year before. When Aidan goes into the strange land across the creek he finds the children and Jenice alive, but can they be rescued or will Aidan be frozen there in time like them? *Across the Creek* is a fantasy based on Cornish folklore but it also can be a way to talk about what is beyond death.

I wrote *Soraya the Storyteller* because I couldn't believe we put kids in detention centres in Australia – I had to write their story, to try and make sense of it for myself. In Pakistan the government put up tent cities for the 3 million refugees who streamed across the border when we were living there. I thought of Scheherazade in the Arabian Nights and how she stayed alive by telling stories for three years, the same time as a Temporary Protection Visa. I collected Afghan folk tales and Persian stories from the Arabian Nights, and thought how these will keep Soraya's spirit alive too. She writes her own stories – about the things her family has suffered, things most of us would never imagine. And through it all the ebony horse from the Arabian Nights flies through Soraya's dreams and helps her find a place where she can be safe.

Character and place are very important to me. I don't start writing until I know the characters and what they are like, and how they'll react to a situation, what they want, what they fear, how they need to grow or what to learn. My characters are also rooted in place. Joel would be a different person if he didn't live by the sea. So would Taj from *Mustara* if he didn't live in the desert. Soraya is becoming a different person because she is displaced – she's learning to live in Australia under the shadow of a Temporary Protection Visa.

But for children and for me, the story also matters a great deal. *Sailmaker* is

a mystery and an adventure. So is *The Keeper*. *Across the Creek* is a quest. *Wolfchild* is maybe more character-driven than story-driven but there is certainly the tension of whether Raw and Morwenna will survive the tidal wave.

My new book for young adults, *The Last Virgin in Year 10* has just gone to press. It is my first book where the main character grapples with her spirituality and sexuality. Caz is trying very hard to hide herself to fit in with the popular crowd at school but she finally finds the courage to be herself.

At the moment I'm writing a story called *Camel Driver*, the sequel to *Mustara*. It traces Ernest Giles' expedition to Perth

from Beltana through the eyes of the Afghan boy, Taj. It's like creative non-fiction and is the first book I've written with real people as characters. For Rumi, the Persian poet, desert poetry was an allegory for the spiritual quest of the soul journeying into the infinite. Taj in *Camel Driver* is also finding that there is more than one desert – there is a desert inside that will also not survive if it doesn't get enough life-giving 'water', in his case, love.

Whatever age group I write for, I know the writing has to be my best. I believe a good children's book is a work of art that can be enjoyed by both children and adults.



## Anne Bartlett

*Anne Bartlett grew up in rural South Australia, and studied English and Drama at Flinders University. She has worked variously as freelance editor, ghost writer, humour columnist, biographer, feature and children's writer. Her first adult novel, Knitting, written as part of a creative writing PhD at the University of Adelaide, was published internationally in 2005 and long-listed for the 2006 Miles Franklin Award. She is married to a Baptist pastor and has four adult children.*

*The following is not Anne's conference paper but an article she wrote for the South Australian Writer's Centre (SAWC) published in their August newsletter.*

### What if?

As writers, most of us are familiar with the concept of 'what if?' We've all seen movies with the variations on 'what if' themes – *Back to the Future* - or read stories like Ray Bradbury's *The Sound of Thunder*, where the death of a single butterfly makes the world an entirely different place.

'What if' is a useful tool for writers; it

can send us in unexpected directions, expanding our knowledge of our characters, or projecting different outcomes for our plots. What if they find a body down by the creek? What if they find a lost shoe? What if their house burns down? What if I change the gender of this character? What if this character has another sibling? What if I write this same scene forty years in the past? What if I tell this story from a different point of view?

Like Bradbury's butterfly, small changes may have a large bearing on outcome. Recently I was considering the emphasis for a new story which considers the long term impact of particular crimes. After a thoughtful morning I realised that even a small shift of emphasis – what if this was a story about growth rather than about justice? – could have large implications for its direction. If one of two parallel lines is altered by only half a degree (or even less), the lines will cross at one end and be infinitely far apart at the other.

We have all experienced the unexpected significance of small events. A moment's lack of concentration can cause a massive accident. A random throwaway comment overheard in a supermarket can generate a significant piece of writing. As writers we heed these small but personally important details - a word, a feeling, an experience – because these minutiae offer some of the best triggers for good writing. These small details enable us to write convincingly about things we truly care about, rather than, say, writing for a market. When we care about our work, we are prepared to write and rewrite for as many drafts as it takes. Emotion and meaning energise the work.

Our family spent some time living in India. We had an elderly Indian friend, Chandapilla, who lived in Pune and wanted to travel south. He was unwell, and needed assistance, so with our ten year old son I took the long train trip across India from Chennai to Pune to accompany him on the train back south. Anyone who has travelled in the two-thirds world will know how relentlessly the exposure to poverty confronts our western sensibilities. In the course of our extended travel conversation Chandapilla mentioned that he employed a gardener, and was helping to educate the gardener's family. 'There is so much poverty,' he said. 'I can't help everybody, but I can help this one. It is a drop in the bucket in India's poverty, but it makes a difference to him.'

A throwaway line.

Back in Chennai we were renting a large first floor apartment, owned by the wealthy Indian family who lived below, surrounded by concrete walls and protected by iron gates. The house was on the edge of a slum village which had no sanitation, and no running water except for a hand pump in the middle of the village. One television served the whole village community. Outside our iron gate, built against the front cement wall that kept us separated from the village, was a lean-to thatched house, with walls that looked like a moth-eaten brush fence. The parents worked, and a blind grandmother cared for a three year old child with a severe physical disability, for the most part sitting outside on the dirt, holding the child in her lap. Every time we went in or out we were confronted with these two nameless faces of Indian poverty.

Until Chandapilla's casual comment, it had not occurred to us that we might have any power of intervention in the life of this family. They were only two people in a densely populated village. But these people had names, and we had more at our disposal than we realised – bilingual friends, and contact with a competent Indian doctor who had set up a school for children with disabilities. The financial support that would sustain this child at the school was insignificant in western terms, the equivalent of a weekly chocolate bar. The main difficulty to overcome was simply our own inertia, the sense of being unable to do anything truly significant in the face of such overwhelming need.

Poverty, starvation, injustice, war and violence are constantly with us. The planet itself suffers from the abuse we have inflicted on it. Every time we watch the news we see images that by their very enormity threaten to disempower us. And perhaps too we are afraid to care too much, afraid that if we let down our guard, fear and despair will overwhelm us. We

are good at distracting ourselves from that which makes us uncomfortable.

But, what if?

What if we all grow our own lettuces in pots?

What if we all refuse to buy anything packaged in plastic?

What if I talk to that Sudanese woman at the bus stop?

What if I sponsor a child?

What if I contribute \$500 to a microloan, enough to raise the living standard of the poorest family of five by 50% in a mere 12 months, and equally importantly, make possible independence and dignity?

What if I become a member of International PEN?

We all have our own particular contexts, preoccupations and concerns. We all have our own possibilities. We can't fix everything, but we can make a difference,

both individually and collectively. We may influence only one person's life, but one person is important. And that one person influences others.

Because I am a writer, I became a member of International PEN, to join in solidarity with other writers who work for understanding and mutual respect among nations, and for freedom of expression. International PEN is a significant organization, the only writers' group in a consultative relationship with the UN.

Many writers are unjustly imprisoned because s/he dared to have an opinion different from a government. I can't mount a charger and grab a lance to tilt at a prison door. My options are less romantic but more effective: as a member of PEN, through letter writing for the Writers in Prison Committee, I, with others, have a degree of influence. Even within PEN the need is bigger than my capacity to respond. I can't write all the letters that are suggested, but I can write some of them, take an interest in a particular country, a particular writer.

Even one person is worth fighting for.  
What if I begin?

