

THE 2009 RAY MATHEW LECTURE



The Opportunity of Distance

Geraldine Brooks

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Geraldine Brooks gave the inaugural Ray Mathew Lecture at the National Library on 22 October 2009.

When I was invited to give this lecture some months ago, I was intrigued to know more about the life and writing of Ray Mathew, so I looked up his biography on the National Library website. I found this sentence:

‘Mathew left Australia in 1960, never to return.’

Never to return. It’s a tragic phrase. It echoes in my mind with other sad and terrible sentences: She never woke up. They never saw each other again. *He left Australia in 1960, never to return.*

It’s a gift to travel, a boon to be able to live abroad and get the feel for other rhythms, different seasons, foreign souls. But it’s a greater gift to come home. My favorite moment is when the noise of the plane’s engine changes pitch on the final approach to Mascot. I sit upright in my seat, swimming out of the deep fatigue of an unrestful airborne night. And there it is, the coast of Australia—sheer and sunlit. High cliffs of sandstone, accepting the blows of Pacific breakers that have travelled, like me, across a hemisphere.

There are several ways for a writer to live abroad. The Ray Mathew way: ‘He left Australia in 1960, never to return’, is perhaps the most drastic. To be truly deracinated, pulled up by the roots, transplanted to a place where you must always be an exotic specimen or an invasive

species. Such a writer must embrace elsewhere and seek a foreign muse, or else mine the dwindling seams of memory. Mathew struggled with this. He spoke eloquently of what was lost, living among alien beings: 'I didn't understand what they did when the door closed after them.'

Nevertheless, for complicated personal reasons, Mathew chose expatriation. There are also the unwillingly exiled writers, forced from home. Early examples of the type are Ovid, restless on the Russian steppe, or the prophet John, packed off by the Emperor Domitian to the rocky isle of Patmos at the end of the first century. Not that exile was bad for their careers. Ovid's poem of exile, *Tristia*, and John's book, *Revelations*, have both been in print for a couple of millennia. But there's no doubt the writers themselves were miserable. John, in particular. He wants off the rock, badly. He spends his days fretting about what's going on in his absence, what his mates are up to, and whether those he left behind are keeping the faith. He etches each passing day on the wall of his cave—scritch, scritch, scritch—tallying the time lost, the years stolen, feeling his roots dessicate in the thin foreign soil. He worries that what he writes is irrelevant to the readers he cares about, that what he has to say is out of touch with new realities that have bloomed and flourished while he's been away, busy taking dictation from that terrifying angel who appears to him. There he is, huge, with eyes like the sun and a sharp, two edged sword issuing from his mouth, and the first thing he says to John is 'Fear not'. Fear not? Yeah. Right. Good luck with that.

There are days, I must admit, when I really relate to John. My present home is an island, though it's verdant and wooded, rocky only where some remarkable glacial erratics rise suddenly in the fields, shading the sheep. Happily, no sword-bearing angels have visited me there. When the flap of mighty wings disturbs the air, it's generally a cormorant. Or maybe a vacationing president's helicopter. It's very beautiful, on Martha's Vineyard, 10 kilometers off America's east coast. Technically, it's part of Massachusetts, which is probably the most sensible state in the USA, with a more or less universal health

care system, excellent public schools and a recognition that if you want these things you need to pay taxes to get them. What a concept! (Someone should explain it to the Californians, who've just flushed one of the world's great public school systems down the toilet because no one wants to pay taxes.) One would be a churl indeed to complain about living on Martha's Vineyard. I'm reminded of this, paradoxically, when I walk in the graveyard, among the island's dead. Some bloke who'd loved to vacation on the Vineyard in summer asked his family to bury him there when he died. His stone reads: 'At last, a year round resident.'

But at this time of year, when I walk my Kelpie in the autumn woods, down by the big shallow pond that mirrors the deciduous spectacle of red and gold trees that our poet Larry Buttrose describes so beautifully, shedding life 'in a silent firework', I know, as he knew—as my Kelpie, who is from Orange, surely knows—that this is not my country.

In my country, deep green fronds hold fast to Huon pines, trailing in the amber waters of the Franklin River. The fleshy trunks of angophoras clutch at the sandstone as bark, not leaf, spirals away in the seasonal rhythm of a biome where fire, not ice, is the exigency. In my country, the stegasaurus spine of the Macdonald Ranges rises blood red in a white hot shimmer, and the sudden, unlikely crag of Mt Strezlecki makes its jaggy exclamation point to the haunted splendor of Flinders Island.

You can love other places; you can be gobsmacked by the many beauties of this diverse planet, just as you can smile with pleasure at the beauty of someone else's child. But the thing you feel when you see your own child's little face is of a different order. You can't control it. It just is. And it becomes all the more so if you are separated. From far away, you see the things you love more clearly. Call it expatriate's hyperopia. It's one of the opportunities of distance.

He left Australia in 1960, never to return. 1960, as it happens, is the year of my first dateable memory. I remember that year clearly because in

the late spring of 1960 we moved, from a dark Victorian terrace house on the unfortunately named Bland Street, Ashfield. My parents had bought a sunny liver brick Federation bungalow in nearby Concord, in Sydney's inner west. I'd just turned five, and I would stay there through all of my schooling and half my uni degree.

It was an unglamorous house—warped Masonite kitchen cabinets that never quite shut right, an old copper in the dank laundry, cracked lino on the bathroom floor. It's the kind of house that these days would get a total makeover—all that lino and Masonite would be crunched up in a skip before you could blink, replaced by granite and stainless steel and sustainably harvested native hardwoods. But I have a soft spot for those unglamorous surfaces. They turned out to be a marvelous backdrop for a happy childhood.

We lived in our imaginations in that house. Material things didn't matter to my parents. What mattered was the bus schedule that could get you to the library and back on a Saturday morning with as many books as each one of us could carry. Newspapers mattered; there were always at least two a day. Stories mattered, most of all. The ones we read, and the ones we lived. The yarns spun by our Great Uncle Curl or Auntie Pansy, our neighbor Edna's—tales told over bottomless cuppas when we had all the time in the world.

Ours was an ordinary, lower middle class Australian life; it was the life of the sprawl, parodied by Barry Humphries, despised by Patrick White, only much later extolled by Les Murray, bless his mighty heart. We laughed with Humphries as he laughed at us. We didn't read much White. But we absorbed his notion that we weren't really much good, somehow. Being 'an Aussie battler' was nothing to be ashamed of, but nothing to be that proud of, either. Art and music came from Europe, geopolitics was shaped by the United Kingdom and the United States. In 1966 Geoffrey Blainey published *The Tyranny of Distance*, and we all went, Aha, of course, that explains everything. It was a kind of Unified Field Theory of Australian history that exculpated us for our status as a backwater.

But even then we weren't really a backwater anymore. A spate was rising that would crash upon our old bigotries and insecurities. Change was coming at us, fast. In our suburb, it took the form of New Australians. When my parents moved there, our block had been an almost-homogenous Irish Catholic enclave. Morning wake up was the brisk tattoo of ladies' heels on the way to morning Mass. But a decade later, it had become something else entirely; a kind of United Nations, with Serbs next door, Turks over the back fence, Italians two doors down, Greeks across the road, Asians on the corner.

Everything expanded in our little Federation house. The pantry gained five spice powder and the veggie garden garlic. A bottle of Slivovitz turned up in the grog cupboard, next to the Resch's DA and the cream sherry. New, disturbing words found their way into the conversations over the cuppas: military coup, junta, Ustasha. New concepts, too: arranged marriage, piece work, discrimination. By the time I reached my teens, I knew that the world rarely afforded a safe, calm childhood like mine. I knew that there was injustice in the world, and injustice on my street, as unscrupulous bosses tried to take advantage of immigrants who didn't know their rights. Thanks to my parents, I also knew that something could be done about this, and that the Aussie ethos of a fair go demanded that we do it.

And then something unprecedented happened. My father, a lifelong leftie, voted for someone who actually got elected. It is a wonderful gift, at the age of 17, to realise that change really is possible, and that sometimes it really does come from the ballot box. Despite everything that happened afterwards, the results of that 1972 It's Time election — the end of our part in the Vietnam war, the beginning of Land Rights, the burgeoning of Australian film, the energizing of our art and literature, the elevation of women's rights, the abolition of uni fees — the pace and the excitement of all that change turned me into a life long optimist. It actually took me years to figure out that the world in fact doesn't usually work that way, and that change for the worse can come just as suddenly. But by then it was too late. I'd been marked for life.

He left Australia in 1960, never to return. I left Australia in 1982, and I was supposed to be gone for a year. I would do what so many of us did, go off for a brief adventure in the wide world. It's another opportunity of distance, that we grow up so well prepared for this; better, maybe, than any people on earth. We mock the wimps who complain about a long flight from New York to London. 'Eight hours? That's not a long flight.' We grow up hearing other languages. Our school friends speak them at home. We hear them on the bus. Yes, we could do more teaching and learning of languages in our schools, especially in our primary schools, where a foreign language and an indigenous Aboriginal language should be part of the curriculum. (I was embarrassed, a few years ago at the Art Galley of NSW, when the marvelous Papunya Tula exhibition opened. The learned and urbane gallery director stumbled even over the pronunciation of Papunya, and an American academic had to be brought along to translate the desert artists' speeches.)

But Australians have learned to face outward to the world. We can't afford insularity or indifference. We have to be globally sensitive, and not only to make polite chat with our multi-ethnic neighbours. Our trade and our security do not allow for introspection. Global markets have earned our attention by their unnerving ability to make us all poorer while we sleep. We've made a habit of jumping into other people's foxholes for the last hundred or so years, and if you are going to get shipped off to Gallipoli or Saigon or Fallujah, we've finally, I hope, learned to ask where these places are and why exactly we should be going there. We want to know. We're interested. We watch other people's movies, we read world literature. We're proud when Kevin speaks Mandarin. Contrast this with Barack Obama, yet to make a speech in Bahasa, a language he speaks fluently. In the US, it wouldn't play so well. The xenophobes would have a field day.

We have some xenophobes too, to be sure; the loud and angry voices of talkback radio and the high pitched squeaks of Pauline Hanson. But most of us aren't that way.

We want to know what's out there. And we go to find out, more often, and farther, and for longer than any other people I know. My journey started in New York City. I went to Columbia University's Journalism School, because a brave and talented young reporter named Greg Shackleton had always wanted to study there. When he was murdered by the Indonesian army in East Timor, his equally brave wife Shirley organised a scholarship in his honour, and it really was an honour to go to that school as the Greg Shackleton scholar. While I was there, *The Wall Street Journal* offered me a job, and I thought, why not? Another year to hone my reporting skills and see more of the US. At the end of that year I married a Columbia classmate from Washington DC and brought him home to Sydney with me. We set up house in Balmain and we've oscillated between there and elsewhere ever since. So that, I suppose, is the third way to be a writer abroad. You oscillate. You get home to water your roots, but you also take odd and unexpected nourishment from foreign soils.

Every place I've lived has given me a book. *Nine Parts of Desire* was my attempt to understand the women whose stories I covered for six years traveling the Mideast as a news correspondent. After that, I wanted to look back to how I'd travelled so far from Bland Street, and so I wrote in *Foreign Correspondence* about the Sydney of my childhood. My first novel, *Year of Wonders*, set in 1660s England, was conceived in a Hampstead attic with a misty view of the South Downs and finished in a sunny bedroom overlooking the RO-RO docks of Sydney's White Bay. I would never have written *March* if I hadn't lived in Civil War-saturated rural Virginia. But that book, too was finished in Balmain. And *People of the Book*, inspired by an overheard remark in Sarajevo under siege, was mostly written there. Often, people ask me when I will write an Australian novel. I want to tell them that all my novels are Australian. Every one of them is, in some way, a product of the stories told and the lessons learned over the cuppas in a Federation house.

Distance has given that little girl the opportunity to peer into foreign cultures, but it is her Australian heart that requires to know why they

make choices so different to the ones that seem natural and right to her. Peter Carey once said that living in the US is like taking a 'moral holiday' because in some ways he doesn't have to feel responsible for the inequities or iniquities of another nation. It's an interesting notion, but I can't share it. My approach remains closer to the journalist's, I think. I'm not on holiday when I'm abroad. I want to interrogate injustice. Mostly these days I want to interrogate the past, to ask why it is that we so often have fallen into the desolate trap of 'us' and 'them' with all its attendant destructive consequences.

It's the core question born of an Australian adolescence lived at a time when we understood in our very sinews that we were all in this together. I am not sure if it is still possible for a kid from a milieu like mine to make the journey I made, my excellent education and health care a given right of citizenship regardless of wealth, my father's unspectacular paypacket adequate to house and feed and clothe us. It seems to me that as we have become more prosperous, we have also become less generous. When a university education was free and available to anyone who qualified, people like me could have big dreams, daring dreams. My friends wanted to become opera librettists and environmental activists and theater directors—career paths that required living for years on a cup of warm fat and a baked potato. They did it, and they succeeded, and Australia is richer for the art they made and the special places they protected. I wonder what happens to dreams like that now, as fees rise and HECs debts inscribe red ink across our graduates' futures.

For we are all in it together. In Australia, and on this shrinking, warming, increasingly crowded and war torn planet. It's our foundational belief, and it could become our greatest export. Recently, Australians gained the unfortunate distinction of being the world's largest per capita emitters of carbon. This could be an opportunity for us: a chance to prove the depth of our national commitment to 'we', if only we had the vision to take the lead in emissions reduction and the guts to stand up, as a model for what the rest of the world must do.

We are in it together. We are in it, alas, even with those who do not believe in 'we' — those whose arid, death-seeking extremism barely has room for 'I'. Distance gave me the opportunity, if you can call it that, to know such people. But it also gave me other knowledge.

I lived in Cairo for two years. It's one of the poorest and most benighted cities on the planet. Yet it has one of the lowest rates of everyday crime. Egyptians have a happy knack of turning the worst frustrations of crowded urban life and truly awful government into the on going punchline for a series of shared communal jokes. Most people are only allowed to see the angry, extremist face of the Arab world. Because of the opportunity of distance, I saw a different face. And it from those faces, those laughing faces in the streets of Cairo — that I draw a sort of mad optimism about our shared fate.

Finally, a caveat about distance. For all its opportunities, distance can still feel like a tyrant, sometimes, when a partner's work or a kid's schooling means we must spend more time *there* than *here*. The oscillation stalls, the roots start to dry out. It's like a high stakes game of musical chairs. Round the world you go, and then the music stops and you have to sit down somewhere, but it's not quite the chair you were aiming for.

The film director Rolf De Heer wrote an essay once in the *Griffith Review*, about taking the stars of *Ten Canoes* to Cannes during the hectic madness of the film festival. Everyone was overwhelmed, but especially the Arnhem Land people, Peter Djigrr and Richard Birrinbirrin. De Heer heard that there was an island a little way offshore that had groves of gum trees on it, so he arranged a boat. When they landed, and Peter saw the eucalypts, he went up to one of the trees and hugged it, saying, 'Tell your cousin over there I'll be home on Thursday.' He knows where his home is, de Heer wrote. I hope I do too.

Mathew left Australia in 1960, never to return. If they ever see fit to write my biography for the National Library website, I know what I want it to say:

Brooks returned to Australia in 20-something, never to depart.

The Ray Mathew Lecture is supported by the Ray Mathew and Eva Kollsman Trust. You can hear the full text of the lecture at <http://www.nla.gov.au/podcasts/talks.html>