

ALS Gold Medal 2017 – response to citation – Zoë Morrison – 11th July 2017

Thank you for that wonderful citation. I am deeply honoured to receive the ALS Gold Medal for Music and Freedom. The list of winners you have placed me on is awe-inspiring and I am so grateful.

I would also like to say how significant I think this award is, and the work that you do, as scholars and teachers of Australian literature.

I did an Arts degree at Adelaide University in the mid to late 1990s. The academic debates I remember most from that time were about identity – equality, diversity and cultural representation. These ideas ignited me. And they ended up shaping my work and life.

The hardest subjects I did as part of that degree, the ones requiring the most intellectual effort, depth and rigour were the ones in the English department, and included Australian literature. I remember, in third year, writing an essay that was a gender analysis of Helen Garner's novella 'The Children's Bach' and starting to actually pull my hair out, strand by strand, so my mother ended up giving me a hat to wear at all times while I wrote. The other thing that happened when writing that essay was the sudden and shocking realization that it was what I wanted to do forever. Not that particular essay, necessarily, but the act of writing. It really mattered to me.

It took me some time, however, to connect writing fiction with my everyday life, and that of others. But literature always seemed to seep through the cracks. When I was doing my DPhil in human geography, I found myself lending a literary type analysis to the social policy I studied, and reading urban landscapes as if they were poems. When I was a junior academic, instead of writing research grants, I started a novel. And in the research and policy career that followed I found myself becoming convinced that the language and narrative constructed around the experience of violence, and other forms of oppression, really mattered to people. They mattered, fundamentally.

Despite all this, we can still lose our faith in literature sometimes. We can wonder what the point is of contributing to an already crowded book-shelf. But the question – what is the point of the novel, of literature, of our Australian literature – feels not unlike asking, what is the point of the sun rising every morning and making a different pattern in the sky every time? And what is the point of walking in the public gardens at this time of year and seeing the light coming through the yellow leaves of the trees, setting them on fire, what is the point of all that? The point, of course, is that literature is not only about life, it has a life of its own. It is living, breathing, eating, and growing. And a failure to recognise its significance is surely a failure to link the book, the play, the poem, the symbol, to the beat of life itself.

This prize is distinguished by its judging panel of Australian literary scholars. Because I have been taught by you, I know that you are the ones who see the grand themes we writers aspire to, and sometimes reach. You are the ones we can rely upon to appreciate the weight of that sentence we spent weeks getting right. You are the ones who discover the hidden tunnels of meaning in our work, those lift up flaps of fiction that make our work richer than we authors can sometimes even gauge. This award means my work has been appreciated fully and with serious endeavour and that does nothing less than ignite my mind again. I thank you so much.

I would also like to thank tonight my wonderful publisher, Nikki Christer, my fine and sensitive editor Catherine Hill, and finally my parents, who gave me an upbringing filled with literature and music, the space to reflect, and the values to make meaning of it all.