

The Nature Conservancy Australia Nature Writing Prize

May 9, 2019

State Library of Victoria, Melbourne

Hello everyone and thank you so much for coming along tonight. My name is Ashley Hay, I'm the editor of *Griffith Review* – apart from which, I write about nature sometimes, about place, about science, about climate, about other organisms, about us. I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this country, and to acknowledge their elders past, present and emerging.

It's my very great privilege to be speaking at this year's Nature Conservancy Nature Writing Prize – it's fifth. *Griffith Review* has been delighted to host winners of this prize in the past, presenting them as multimedia essays on our website, and we look forward to this association again this year.

It's been a big year of association for *Griffith Review*, The Nature Conservancy, and the McLean Foundation – we were thrilled to have TNC and the McLean Foundation as our publishing partners for our first edition of the year, *Writing the Country*, and we've been thrilled and excited by the response to and reception of that book. I'd like also to thank the judges, Delia Falconer and Tom Griffiths, for all their work, and to congratulate all the shortlisted writers. It was exciting to see so many of our contributors on that list.

In *Griffith Review's* first fifteen-years of being, under the guidance of founding editor Julianne Schultz, the journal took pride in having its finger on the pulse, in turning its lens in the right direction at the right time to track some change or some development, some matter of that moment. I have to say that that's some act to follow. And it was confronting to realise just how timely the appearance of our *Writing the Country* edition would be in that way; it was as if the world itself was helped us on.

We published this edition at the end of January 2019, Australia's hottest month on record: Cloncurry had just experienced 43 days above 40°C. We sold on through February, with its record-breaking Queensland floods. We sold on into Australia's hottest ever March. In that month, Australia's temperatures were running at more than 2° above the average.

Now, in this first week beyond the life of this edition, we've had the United Nations' report on the world's biodiversity – with those gobsmacking, incredible numbers. The Guardian's story on this included this one, shocking sentence: "The biomass of wild mammals has fallen by 82%, natural ecosystems have lost about half their area and a million species are at risk of extinction."

One million.

It's an understatement to say that it's important to know about these stories – it's never been more critical to write the world, to write what's going on, to bear witness to the extraordinary pressures the world and its ecosystems are under, the extraordinary adaptation it's trying to make; the stories of success, and of failure. That phrase – that "bearing witness" – has always felt to me like one of the clearest pillars of what gets scooped under the tag of "nature writing": to stop and observe, to pay attention, to notice, to record.

On this, I'd like to invoke an odd triptych of names.

I was reading Marina Benjamin's beautiful and powerful memoir *Insomnia* earlier this week – Benjamin is a senior editor of *Aeon* and was a guest at last weekend's Sydney Writers' Festival. In *Insomnia*, she quotes Charles Simic, the wonderful poet, on Joseph Cornell, the extraordinary artist, the extraordinary collagist. Simic wrote of Cornell's technique that he practiced "the art of reassembling fragments of pre-existing images in such a way as to form a new image". Simic writes of the genius, the magic, of Cornell's creations: "the commonplace is miraculous," he says, "if rightly seen."

In undertaking to bear witness, to collect small fragments of different places and things – any-thing places and things – and to present these with a weight and honouring, nature writing can also render the commonplace miraculous, or remind us that this equivalence exists. It can reassemble fragments to make them part of the bigger, extraordinary story that is our complicated biological world.

At this moment in time, on this planet, nature writing is, as the Australian novelist and essayist James Bradley suggested in an essay for the *Sydney Review of Books*, "animated by a profound ethical urgency, an understanding that in the twenty-first century to write about nature is a political act, a way of bearing witness to the ecocide humans are inflicting on the biosphere".

I'm quoting a lot of other writers to you here; I'm a collagist in that way. In a sense, I think this is part of the way that nature writing works – taking commonplace pieces of various things and laying them alongside each other to reveal something new: to celebrate, to clarify, to expose or explain.

In part, too, that's what this year's winning work has done. It's taken locations that are, in some ways, neither here nor there, but everywhere as much as anywhere. There are always layers present in nature writing, with its navigations and excavations of everything from history and archaeology, to ecology, biology, geology, hydrology and more. That's part of this genre's richness.

And what's powerful about these words, too, is the ways they find to talk about the issue that must perhaps sit at the heart of any Australian nature writing – the dispossession of the original inhabitants of this continent by the colonial invasion that began in 1788; the ongoing damage of this.

The words that have won this year's TNC prize – wonderfully judged by Delia Falconer and Tom Griffiths – step into this space too.

I hope you'll spend some time with these words, these stories. I hope they'll help you to bear witness to the stories you inhabit, to the extraordinary in the commonplace in your world. To the stories the world is writing for you.

Thanks again to TNC and the McLean Foundation for the opportunity of being part of this event – it's my hope that we can include coverage of nature writing, of environment and environmental science,

no matter what theme *Griffith Review* is exploring, and I'm eager to attract dedicated support for that.

When you walk back out into your world later this evening, stop a moment, and bear witness to what you see. Tell its stories – tell yourself, no matter who else you tell. It's not Marina Benjamin's insomnia that I fear is blanketing our telling of these observations; it's a somnolent sleepwalking that means we rarely look around at where we are, what's going on.

These words will help you to do that.

Thank you.