ACU BOOK OF THE YEAR SPEECH

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for this outstanding and entirely unexpected honour.

As someone who has spent my working life, as both a teacher and a writer, passionately promoting productive literate practices as the best – we might say *only* – way of achieving meaningful personal and professional growth, it is particularly gratifying to see my book chosen as the inaugural winner of this remarkable award. I have to say; I love the fact that the outcome of this award is unequivocally directed towards active literacy and its natural offshoot, active contemplation – which in turn has the capacity to lead the individual towards affirmative action on behalf of the community. Rather than the more standardised approach of prize-giving which suggests that this book has merit and is therefore worth reading, the ACU Book of the Year Award says – this book has merit and here it is. It's yours. Make it part of your mission as a learner; make it part of the empowerment that can be and should be your developing literacy; your developing humanity.

That's a tremendous gift to the writer but equally so, to the reader; the deliberate fostering of the relationship that must exist between language, story and reader if we are to promote literacy and its most powerful consequence; a future built on cultural awareness, understanding and compassion.

I am so pleased and grateful to be part of such an important initiative.

This Is My Song has been spoken about as part of what we might call the pantheon of Holocaust literature. While I accept that as a necessary entry point for many readers, I see the novel as having a range of tributary concerns. Once you are launched, there are many rivers to follow: the notion of intergenerational trauma and how that affects both groups and individuals, the interplay of individualism versus community that confronts many of us in the negotiation of how we might best lead our lives, the complex dynamics of contemporary family arrangements, and the broad consequences of the opening-up of the greater world for relatively insulated and – more often than we would care to admit – insular societies such as Australia, to name but a few.

However, there's another river which, for me, represents the creative urgency of the novel. It's a river made from the merging of two watercourses and it pours forth from the deepest part of every continent and, intrinsically, from the heart of every human. I'm speaking, of course, of our need to create stories, as a reordering and refinement of the events and people that are our world; and our need to create music, as a reordering and refinement of the noise that is our world.

This capacity of story and music to span across time and place was a major influence in the development of my novel. There is wide acceptance around the idea that, even when people might be all but destroyed by events beyond their control, as long as the mind has the capacity for that one free thought, the singular expression of who-I-am, then the dignity of Self will, ultimately, defeat the malice of the Other. Our striving to express that freedom and dignity most typically comes through our telling and retelling of stories; stories that will, ultimately, constitute our art, our songs.

In my novel, this is the realisation that the character Joe reaches, after he has discovered a song written by his grandfather during his time inside the death camp at Auschwitz. Joe's decision to sing his grandfather's song at a competition leads him to the further realisation that there is an indelible link between the art that he is experiencing and the life that he has been gifted. In his recasting of himself, he sees that: 'It was in his blood now. No, more; it *was* his blood.'

Joe accepts and embraces the power of story and song in a way that will potentially move him from confusion to self-actualisation. However, his grandfather Rafael, traumatised by his experiences at Auschwitz, chooses to spend the remainder of his life in isolation, even refusing to allow music into his home. What Rafael doesn't realise – or perhaps realises but ignores – is that this is impossible, because music is inextricably woven into our stories, and the stories of those who went before us. Try as we might, we cannot deny the song that has become us; the song that shapes our spirit and, ultimately, plays host to our destiny.

This notion that our stories, our songs, span time and place as much as they span us, was brought home to me not initially by music, but by visual art. To sketch an autobiography of the life of *This Is My Song*: the story was conceived in Prague, born

in a cottage in Brisbane, nurtured through childhood via a fellowship in Canberra, and finally able to tread cautiously into adolescence in Sydney. Within that timeline, the conception is probably the most interesting point. My wife and I were visiting Prague and decided to go to the Jewish quarter. (I'm married to a History teacher; we always go to the Jewish Quarters). Pinkas Synagogue, an appropriately beautiful and stately building, houses the memorial to citizens of the Czech Republic who died during the Holocaust, and also has a permanent exhibition of artwork done by the children of Theresienstadt Ghetto. No exhibition of the works of humans has moved me as much as the paintings in that room – and I have been to the Louvre, seen David in Florence, the Royal Palace in Seville, stupas and enormous golden Buddhas in Asia, even spent a few testing moments with Mona Lisa and several hundred selfie-enthusiasts – but the works of these children spoke – no, clamoured – across seventy-five years in a way that no other works have done.

I've thought long and hard since that day about why I was so deeply moved by the art of those children. Why would a middle-aged, middle-class, privileged white Australian care so much about these naïve pieces? The obvious answer is contextual; however, I think there was something greater at work in terms of the scope of the pieces. The children drew their present-day circumstances – the horrors of slavery, torture and death depicted alongside the pleasures of companionship and play – but they also drew their past lives, often in halcyon ways, and their desires for a future in the idealised, pastelled World to Come. Viewed collectively, their art re-formed the grand narrative of redemption that is the basis for Western story-making in the Christian tradition. It is a narrative shaped by hope; that the faith-based values that we have gleaned from our past will help us respond to the difficult present, and thus provide for a better, fairer future.

So, the question became not so much <u>why</u> was I moved, but <u>how</u> was I moved? Put simply, their work was profound and uplifting.

As I note in the novel's afterword, these ten- and eleven-year-olds were taught by a brave lady called Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, referenced as a teacher in my story. Before she and the children were sent to Auschwitz, Dicker-Brandeis had the courage and foresight to store their drawings and paintings in two suitcases that were shoved beneath

a bed. She couldn't save the lives of the children from that terrible, murderous juggernaut, but she could and did preserve their art, their stories, their songs – and in so doing, provided the world with a unique and beautiful legacy.

The writer has myriad responsibilities, one of which is to shine light into corners left dark by history, or ignorance, or wilful cover-up. Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the children of Theresienstadt Ghetto are the real heroes of *This Is My Song*. My own contribution, in exploiting the flexibility of fiction to bring this story and some of its implications to a broader audience, is very much a privilege, one which has now been extended through the agency of this Award. Thank you once again, not just on my own behalf, and that of my wonderful publisher Scholastic Australia, but on behalf of those deserving children and their courageous teacher. In this instance, the picture-makers are also the true story-makers, and the songs that emanate from those stories will always be theirs, and theirs alone.