



The Society of Women Writers NSW Inc. & The State Library of NSW presents

# Dare to be an Author: Literary Festival

**Kristin Prescott spoke with Festival Director Dr Wendy Michaels about her plans for Dare to be an Author.**



## Why did you decide to become involved with the inaugural SWW Literary Festival?

An invitation to participate in innovative projects has always been irresistible to me. When Dr Maria Hill approached me about this Inaugural Festival I could see an opportunity to contribute skills I have acquired directing other literature, drama and Shakespeare festivals. I relish the challenge of creating something new and this Festival with its focus on women's writing was particularly alluring. As a writer, reader and women's historian I am passionate about promoting women's writing and reading – not just in the celeb-style buy-my-book writers' festivals that have proliferated in recent years. What I wanted most of all was to create a substantial discussion space, perhaps like the ancient Greek Agora, where writers and readers could engage in animated conversation about ideas and issues, although of course, women were excluded from that space. I wanted to recognise and celebrate the wide variety of writing genres which contemporary Australian women employ in creating their artistic works.

## The Festival is called 'Dare to be an Author' – where did the name come from?

Jane Austen, that iconic English writer of the Regency period, once spoke of herself as one who 'dared to be an authoress'. It was a big dare for a young woman to write novels exposing the follies and foibles of the world she lived in. And of course there was the whole question of who would publish a woman writer as Frances Burney, Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) and the Brontë sisters found. These women, writing two hundred years ago confined by social structures that relegated them to domestic realms wrote with visionary passion, with lucid insight, with witty compassion. They rose to the challenge of writing and publishing in their man-made world. Virginia Woolf, in her wonderful essay on 'Women and Fiction' famously advised that if a woman was to write fiction she must have 'money and a room of her own'. Today, few women writers have that luxury but don't have to contend with the same issues as their writerly sisters of yore. However, that is not to say they don't face challenges. So we wanted to examine that notion of daring to be an author in today's world – and to ask, what it means for a woman to dare to be an author. Our focus is not only on novels, or even fiction. We are addressing the wide range of diverse genres that women choose to write in as well as exploring aspects of the

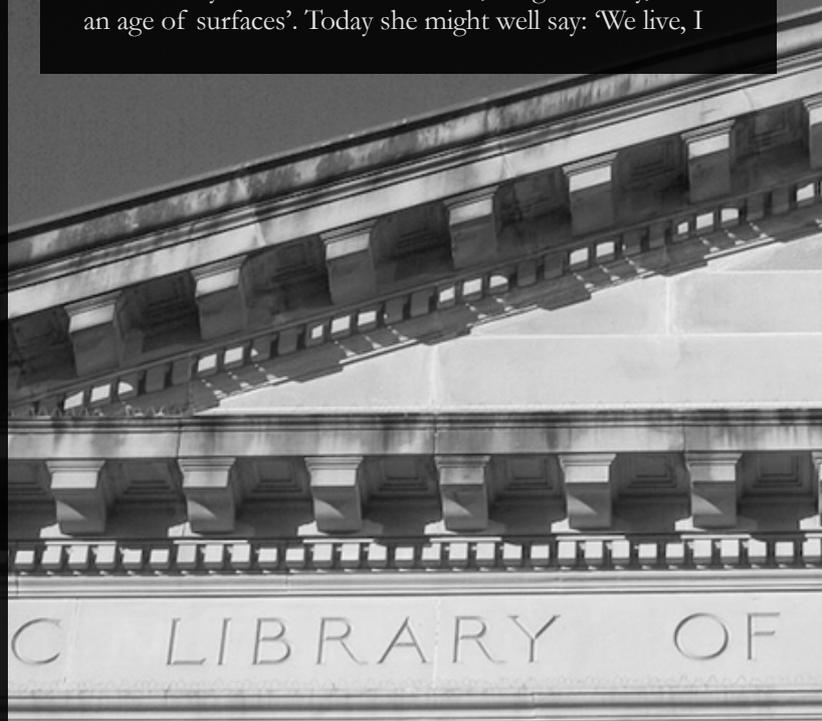
contexts in which women's writing reaches its readers. So we have a session dealing with the challenges of writing for performers and another that features the trials, tribulations and triumphs of publishing women writers' books.

## Why do you believe Literary Festivals, such as this one, are so important?

Festivals bring communities together, encourage collaboration and foster networks. Cultural, artistic and literary festivals offer unique opportunities to explore ideas, issues, values in our world, to explore previously unknown worlds and enter imaginary worlds. They are celebrations of our past, our present and our future – they allow us to ponder on who we are and who we might become. Literary festivals, the modern form of the village story teller or the post-Enlightenment Salon celebrate the glories and wonders of language, honouring the power of the written word – on the page, on the stage, on the screen. Words are the currency of our internet connected mobile world – but all too often language slips and slides into what Don Watson calls 'weasel words'. Our Festival, *Dare to be an Author* promotes a healthy respect for words, for writing, and for writers. We focus on the role of the author in our lives, in our communities, in our society. We honour the vision of the original group of inspirational journalists who conceived of a society that would encourage Australian women writers and promote Australian literature. This Inaugural Festival showcases and celebrates this richness and variety of Australian women's writing. That could not be better illustrated than in our Literary Festival Patron, Emeritus Professor Elizabeth Webby – one of our most important scholars whose life's work has been dedicated to the promotion of Australian literature.

## There are already some fantastic guests locked in – can you reveal any names?

I recall Lady Bracknell said: 'We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces'. Today she might well say: 'We live, I



regret to say, in an epoch of celebrity'. However, all too often the celebrities that traipse across our public stages lack substance, depth and vision. That is not the case with the guests we have lined up for this Festival. In selecting speakers we sought the well-known in the public realm as well as those with acknowledged achievements in particular fields. We chose writers, directors, editors and publishers who would willingly share their wealth of knowledge and experience with our writers, readers and stage, television and cinema audiences. Lee Lewis, for instance, the Artistic Director of Griffin Theatre Company has a passion for her theatre's mission to be the voice and heart of Australian theatre writing. Noëlle Janaczewska, winner of Yale University's Windham Campbell Prize spans a myriad of performance genres, poetry, essays, memoir. NSW Premier's Award winning writer, Debra Oswald creates work for stage and screen as well as fiction for children. Importantly, we invited our guests to talk about issues and ideas not only themselves or their latest book. Blanche d'Alpuget, winner of the inaugural Commonwealth Award for Literature will explore that vexed question of publishing houses in the rapidly changing publishing industry. After wrestling with this question Blanche has decided to self-publish her second book in the *Young Lion* series. Bettina Arndt has experienced the women writer's dare from another perspective – she dares to write about topics that Jane Austen's pen could not have put on paper – sex and other unmentionables. Other award winning authors include Australian Society of Authors Board member, Helen O'Neill and Wiradjuri woman and ANU post-doctoral fellow, Jeanine Leane along with publisher, Anna Valdinger and editor, Elena Gomez. It is a truly star-studded line up and a not-to-be-missed Festival.

### **As well as guest speakers, what other activities are being planned?**

An important aspect of planning any Festival is to have not only a variety of speakers to cater for different audience tastes and expectations but also to have a variety of presentation forms. We took that into account with the day's planning. Apart from book-ending the day with keynote addresses we included a conversation session and

a panel discussion. And of course there are exhilarating moments of celebration as we launch three new books. The Hon Susan Ryan OA launches Blanche d'Alpuget's *The Lion Rampant*, Dr Julie Mundy-Taylor launches Libby Hathorn's *Outside*, and Mihiri Udabage launches Susanne Gervay's *Being Jack*. There are opportunities for book purchasing from the Library Bookshop and the authors will be available for signing during the tea and lunch breaks. Most of our guest speakers will remain for the entire Festival so attendees will have the opportunity to talk informally with them. Importantly too, morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea are provided in the spacious Macquarie Room.

### **The Festival is being put on by the SWW in partnership with the NSW State Library – how important is it to support historic cultural institutions such as these?**

The State Library with its Macquarie Street location adjacent to Parliament House makes it one of the most prominent state institutions in NSW. It is also one of the most important cultural institutions with its fine collection of books and resources along with the historic Mitchell Library collection. The Metcalfe Auditorium is an ideal space for an intimate Festival that facilitates audience interaction with speakers. Dr Alex Byrne, the State Librarian has been most supportive of our initiative to establish this inaugural Festival. It is an appropriate collaboration between one of the oldest writers' societies and the State's historic library. We are also fortunate that The Right Honourable Clover Moore, Lord Mayor of Sydney has agreed to officially open the Festival. In a city that has been all too ready to tear down its history in the name of progress and development such an historic collaboration is a landmark in Sydney's cultural landscape.

### **And of course, there will be the presentation of the inaugural Di Yerbury UK Residency Award to an outstanding member of the Society of Women Writers NSW. Can you remind people what's involved?**

This generous UK residency has been donated by the Society of Women Writers' Patron, Professor Di Yerbury. The residency will be located in the beautiful North Devon town of Barnstaple. The residency is awarded to an outstanding member of the Society of Women Writers who is over the age of 55 and researching or writing a manuscript of either fiction or non-fiction that is set in or linked to the United Kingdom. The awardee will be accommodated in a comfortably furnished one bedroom apartment in Barnstaple for three months from February to April 2015. Electricity and phone is included as part of the residency. This is a wonderful opportunity and a generous grant from Professor Di Yerbury who has been a long standing supporter of Australian women writers, and our highly valued Society of Women Writers' Patron.

**TICKETS ON SALE FOR SWW MEMBERS FROM 1 JULY - DON'T MISS OUT!!**

**Public tickets available from 8 July 2014.**

