

“Let Me Through
I’m a Writer!”

The Dream Merchant in a Time of Consequences

Writers are more than their dreams and stories, they have the power to change audiences – and the world. JOHN COLLEE looks at the role of the writer in a time of change.



FIVE years ago, Franny Armstrong came to Sydney with her campaigning film about climate change, *The Age of Stupid*.

In her introduction she asked the packed auditorium at Sydney Theatre if anyone knew any jokes about climate change. The response was an awkward silence. Even in Australia, no-one knew a joke about climate change.

This strikes me as significant, given that the jokes we generate reflect the communal unconscious. When society thinks profoundly about a subject, the first signs of narrative life appear as jokes on the topic. If we're not telling jokes, then we probably haven't thought hard enough about it. Or maybe we don't really care.

I was sitting in the audience at Franny's film and I actually did know a joke about climate change but I didn't feel quite brave enough to put my hand up... so I'll tell it now.

This one was told to me by Ross Gelbspan - a Jewish-American journalist who's written a lot about global warming. His joke goes like this: There's a guy working in Jerusalem and every day he walks to work past the Wailing Wall and every day, morning and evening, there's a Rabbi rocking backwards and forwards, banging his head on the ancient stonework and mumbling to himself.

Finally, after a year of observing this, our hero stops and says "Rabbi, I'm not a religious person myself but I'm so impressed with your devotion, can I ask you what you're praying for?"

He anticipates that the Rabbi will mention "Peace in the Middle East" or some other impossible dream, but instead the Rabbi says, "Well, I used to be a climate scientist but I couldn't compete with the fossil fuel lobby so instead I come here and pray for God to bring the world to its senses and slash carbon emissions before we totally destroy the planet."

Our man asks: "So how do you feel this strategy is working out for you?"

And the Rabbi says: "I feel that I'm banging my head against a bloody great wall."

If you want to know how that Rabbi feels, ask Tim Flannery who has been banging his head against this particular wall for the last decade. It was Tim who first alerted me to the dreadful mathematics of climate change with his book, *The Weather Makers*, and for a while we were going to make a film about it (sponsored by Working Title) but we were beaten by a guy called Al Gore who had the same idea.

So the film didn't get made... but Tim's book was a huge success and Tim was made Australian of the Year.

In France, when people make a huge contribution to the arts and sciences they are voted to become a member of an elite group called the Académie. Their close friends are invited to contribute for a sword - an épée. There's kind of a knighthood ceremony and the esteemed scientist, film director or whatever is made a member of the Academy for life.

In Australia, we do it slightly differently. We get the sword and we stick it in you. If you're standing up for something important like climate change or the rights of refugees we take away your funding, we disband your organisation, and we attack your reputation in *The Australian* newspaper.

This didn't just happen to Tim. It's happened to every single climate scientist or politician who has dared to challenge the idea that coal is good for humanity. No-one at home or abroad is exempt from this kind of low treatment. The right-wing press even had a go at the Pope whose recent encyclical on climate change is one of the purest, most convincing arguments you will read for the moral case on climate change action.

What the Pope pointed out – and what climate change deniers find so threatening about carbon emission reduction – is that this issue is really about global equity. When you endorse rampant consumerism, and the squandering of fossil fuels that currently accompanies it – you are reducing, worldwide, the future availability of basic essentials such as arable land, productive oceans and a climate conducive to food production. Keep burning carbon and poor people will pay the bill for generations to come. It's as simple as that.

We don't need more money or different technology to fix this problem – we already have all the tools we need. We do need to persuade the developed world to take a small reduction in our current living standards, so future generations don't suffer for decades – perhaps centuries to come. We need to be better people, more imaginative, more compassionate. Which is why this is a problem for creative people – especially writers, and not just politicians.

We write fiction because it changes people. That's what makes it a worthwhile job. If you switch off a TV drama or put down a novel having merely been entertained, and not subtly changed as a person, then the writer has failed.

If that sounds pretentious, then consider your favourite movies of all time and ask yourself why you chose those films. It's not merely on account of the acting, the direction, or the camerawork. It's more usually for the message that's inherent in the story, and that message is usually so subliminal that you may not recognise it until years afterwards. Casablanca is about choosing sides; Raiders of the Lost Ark is about the power of the spiritual; E.T. is about letting go of the thing you love.

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The best popular writing is always about the things that matter, about finding our better angels, about how to be good.

For me the best film about climate change is *Jaws* – not that Benchley and Gottlieb had that exact subject in mind, but they did capture, quite perfectly, the typical reaction of society to existential threat: firstly denial, then abrogation of responsibility, then challenging the evidence, prioritising the status quo, inadequate partial responses and finally, FINALLY, the moment of acceptance... “We need a bigger boat!”

In tandem with this slow evolution of the protagonists, it’s a common trope in all monster movies that the monster keeps exceeding expectations. Just when you think you have the measure of it, the monster turns out to be bigger than you thought.

What’s truly scary about climate change is that this monster grows exponentially. If you’re a fan of zombie movies you already get it: one zombie infects two, two infect four, four goes to eight, then sixteen, and pretty soon the whole planet is infested.

However, the people we really need to persuade – the oil and coal lobby – mostly come from a background in earth sciences. They understand slow linear processes like erosion and sedimentation. When you point out that over a third of the Arctic Sea ice has disappeared in 30 years or the ocean is a third more acidic than in pre-industrial times, or that half of the coral in the Great Barrier Reef has died and a third of all species will be gone by mid-century, they’ll say, “Oh, perhaps, but you’re exaggerating – these things take forever to play out.”

They don't, not at this stage in the narrative, when the zombies are already over the perimeter wall or the shark is in the bay. It's all happening faster and faster – the projections getting more and more dire.

As Winston Churchill memorably put it before the Second World War engulfed Europe: "The era of procrastination, of half-measures, of soothing and baffling expedients, of delays, is coming to its close. In its place we are entering a period of consequences."

I used to be a doctor and it strikes me that our planet, like the human body, is a complex array of interconnected systems which function together or fail together. That's the essence of James Lovelock's Gaia theory which used to be dismissed as weird science but is now increasingly mainstream.

If you have witnessed someone dying of cancer or dying of old age, or seen someone giving birth, you will know what exponential change looks like. For a long while nothing seems to happen, then some small signs start to appear, then bigger signs and finally the kind of symptoms you can't ignore. After that, it's a headlong rush, faster and faster until the end.

If the Earth was a patient right now, we'd have diagnosed multiple organ failure. There would be all sorts of alarms going off, the doctors would be arriving with the resuscitation trolley and the frightened relatives would be backing away, worried that it's already too late.

I know this is depressing. The more you read the science, the more depressing it seems – the more impossible that we can ever turn this juggernaut around. It's a perfectly logical, human response just to give up, stop caring and accept the inevitable.

And it's the job of storytellers, and songwriters, bagpipe players and poets, to remind us of our better angels, and persuade us of the nobility of struggle.

I have a friend called Jesse Martin who sailed single handed round the world at the age of seventeen. When I asked him, "Wasn't it miserable – weren't you cold and lonely and frightened and often convinced you would die?" he said "Of course, but if I never wished this shit wasn't happening then it wouldn't be a proper adventure."

That's the great thing about this particular period in history. It is that exciting, it is that desperate, it is that finely-balanced. If you ever wished you were in a movie where the fate of the world rested on the action of a few ordinary people you are in that movie, we are in that movie now.

The exponential rate of change applies to the solution as well as the problem. In the 10 years I've been involved with climate activism, our progress has been frustratingly slow; but suddenly, this past year, huge changes have started to occur.

The divestment campaign sort of worked. The price of coal has plummeted and the reputation of coal has gone with it. The price of renewables is falling very fast. Increasingly, a low carbon economy is making much more financial sense than the coal-fired economy we've got, with gas replacing coal and solar replacing gas. It's tempting to think that even if our politicians remain entrenched, economic forces will finally force them to get out of their rut.

The question is whether that will happen before the other tipping point – the point at which two degrees of warming slips out of reach and we start to discover – God forbid – what four degrees does to the planet.

So we're at this critical time, this amazing time when actually a small contribution from everyone can make a huge difference to the course of history.

These moments don't come often. When they come you need to be thankful for them because they represent a chance to show who we are and what we are made of. That means you – whatever your particular skills.

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There's a story that The Battle of Waterloo, 200 years ago, was decided by the fact that Napoleon had a strangulated hemorrhoid.

Napoleon had the advantage of superior numbers versus a disunited multinational force, but he also had a very painful thrombosed and strangulated hemorrhoid. If one plucky soul in his vast entourage had the courage and insight and presence of mind to push the hemorrhoid back inside the Emperor's bottom then his pain would have been relieved, he'd have sat comfortably on his horse and the entire course of European history would have been entirely changed.

My point is we all have the ability to make a big difference. And if ever there was a time, when inspirational writing was needed to remind people of their ability to embrace change, and their duty to future generations, then now is that time.

I'm not suggesting everyone starts writing about climate change. I'm saying:

There is a tide in the affairs of men.

Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries.

On such a full sea are we now afloat, and we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures.

If you're a novelist, or a TV writer, a blogger, a cartoonist, or a humorist, there is currently a war going on: science versus ignorance, hope versus despair.

To create a better world we first need to imagine it. So roll up you sleeves, put on your gloves, and get stuck in. 🇺🇸

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