

# State Library of South Australia

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## Books In My Life

Mike Rann

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I was so pleased to be asked to give a talk about books at this Library. When I returned to Adelaide from Italy last November, I was also delighted to be asked by Education Minister Blair Boyer to give a video address to be played at an event celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Premier's Reading Challenge. I am very proud of this initiative which now involves around 122,000 school students each year reading, and being tested for comprehension, on a series of books. Those who complete at least 12 books (but often many more) are presented with medals at school ceremonies. Unlike medals for sport or Dux of School these are medals that most children can win. The medals progress each year from bronze, to silver, to gold, right through to Hall of Fame for those who have completed the Reading Challenge 7 times. I figured that the kids would at first be attracted by the idea of medals but would also fall in love with the books. And that's exactly what happened. And we have had Reading Challenge Ambassadors, from sports stars like Olympic hockey gold medallist Juliet Haslam and former Crows captain Mark Bickley to wonderful children's authors like Mem Fox and Phil Cummings, going out to schools to encourage students with their reading. More people have come up to me to talk about their or their child's participation in the Reading Challenge than any other initiative I have ever been involved with. I remember the letter I received was from a librarian at a council library telling me she had never had so many children coming in during their school holidays to borrow books. I'm told the Premier's Reading Challenge has the highest per capita participation rate of any literacy project in the world and over the past 20 years those involved have read 27 million books.

However, I didn't come from a background that celebrated books. As a child in both London and New Zealand I do not remember books at home apart from Barbara Todd's "Worzel Gummidge" and several books on Robin Hood plus my brother's books on birds. I can remember my parents getting the Reader's Digest with its condensed, sanitised short stories and corny jokes in the "Laughter is the Best Medicine" page. There were hardly any books around the house and no book shelves but there were newspapers and magazines. My father was an electrician in Fleet Street and later at the New Zealand Herald and my brother Chris was a newspaper and then radio reporter. So, newspapers were part of our lives. And I loved reading.

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I was also a nerd. I was obsessed with politics from an early age. British politics. US politics. Kiwi politics. Any politics. At High School our English teacher

asked what we'd like to be when we left school. It was the time of the Apollo moon programme. In addition to those aspiring to be teachers, police officers, carpenters, nurses and lawyers there were several who wanted to be astronauts. I said I wanted to be a "journalist and a Labour MP". Everyone laughed but I am not sure how many of them became astronauts. New Zealand couldn't even put a sheep in space! I kept going with politics. I was the school's "debater of the year", a student politician and one of the leaders of the campaign against French nuclear testing. Although I also studied history and philosophy, I did a double major in political studies at the University of Auckland and went on to do a Masters in politics, became a political journalist in New Zealand broadcasting before moving to Adelaide to work for the Dunstan government and then become Don's speechwriter and press secretary.

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My reading life has overwhelmingly focused on nonfiction, particularly history and biography rather than, I am ashamed to say, fiction which my wife Sasha, a former English and Drama teacher, reads voraciously. I was so nerdy that as a teenager while other boys my age were breaking their noses and dreaming of becoming All Blacks, I was devouring Time Magazine and Newsweek and at 15 borrowed from the local council library the 888-page report of the Warren Commission into the assassination of President Kennedy. Just as I loved the "7 Up" British television documentaries on the effects of class on a child's life, I relished each edition of "The Making of the President" series of books by Theodore H White on the 1960, 64, 68 and 72 Presidential elections. There was a heroic, larger than life quality and a good deal of myth making to White's earliest books written before Vietnam, assassinations and Watergate soured the image of politics and the reporting of it.

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So, tonight's talk has posed me with hard choices. I briefly considered focusing on Machiavelli, particularly his books "The Prince" and "The Discourses", but whose reputation has been so unfairly damaged by the term "Machiavellian" which is used as an adjective to describe evil motives and sinister, self-serving manipulation rather than Machiavelli's description of the realities of the times in which he lived. To be Machiavellian is seen as a few rungs worse than Nixonian but in truth anyone with a serious interest in the evolution of power and its uses should read Machiavelli. Machiavelli influenced not only Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe but Locke, Hobbes and Hume, even Francis Bacon, Descartes and Rousseau. Many of the Founding Fathers of American Independence including Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison studied Machiavelli, and particularly America's second President, John Adams, who admired Machiavelli's descriptions and prescriptions centred on the realities of states-craft rather than promoting an Aristotelian ideal of how we'd like governing to be. However, I decided not to focus today on Machiavelli lest I be typecast.

In more recent times I have been transfixed by Robert Caro's brilliant series of biographies entitled the Years of Lyndon Johnson: "Path to Power" (1982), "Means of Ascent" (1990), "Master of the Senate" (2002) and "Passage to Power" (2012) which focused on LBJ's transition from Vice President through JFK's assassination and to

the first few months of his Presidency. Twelve years later we are impatiently awaiting the final volume from Caro, now 88, covering LBJ's 64 election landslide, civil rights, Vietnam and a divided America, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, unrest in American cities and on college campuses, LBJ's decision not to run for President again in 1968 and his death a few years later. The length of time between each volume is testimony to Caro's exhaustive research, interviewing and re-interviewing LBJ's associates, sometimes pushing them until they get angry and let slip information beyond cliched, oft repeated anecdotes, helping Caro's triangulation of his subject or to get to the essence of issues Johnson was involved with. And then there's his discipline of painstakingly going through thousands of documents, transcripts and letters, and of course, knowing where to look. The scale of such an enterprise is brought into sharp focus when we learn that just one of his sources, the LBJ Library in Austin, Texas, has 40,000 boxes of documents containing 32 million pages.

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Caro magisterially explores the character and personality of a man who at times readers will come to despise as a lying, crude, sometimes monstrous, self-serving and corrupt bully and yet then admire him for using the same manipulative skills to secure passage of the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act and the "Great Society" anti-poverty initiatives. LBJ was a Shakespearean figure who transformed a nation but was brought down by his own demons. Caro writes about means and ends but most of all his focus is on political power and how it is deployed. LBJ himself said "power is where power goes" and Caro follows that trail because political power impacts on all our lives. For Caro biography must serve, and let me quote him, as a "vessel for something even more significant: the examination of the essential nature-the most fundamental realities-of political power".

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I am pleased to hear that the final volume of this extraordinary series is well on its way and will hopefully be published before the author turns 90.

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I went through an obsessive phase of reading about India. After Labor, led by Des Corcoran, lost the 1979 election, I went to Kangaroo Island for a break, taking with me a collection of books on Nehru and Gandhi, starting with Louis Fischer's "The Life of Mahatma Gandhi" published in 1950. My disappearance nearly had consequences that could have affected the course and location of my career because new Opposition Leader John Bannon wanted to offer me a job but couldn't find me in those days before mobile phones. I was on KI reading about Gandhi. If I had stayed a few days longer I would have probably have ended up back in New Zealand.

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I love India, its history, religions, cultures and cuisines and have visited there many times. Nehru, in my view was one of the great writers as well as leaders of the 20th Century. His books are still well worth reading including his "Discovery of India", "Glimpses of World History", "Letters from a Father to his Daughter" (comprised of 30 letters written to his ten year old daughter Indira who was at boarding school) and his magnificent and widely acclaimed "An Autobiography".

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The world saw a glimpse of Nehru's literary skills in the speech he gave on the eve of independence when he said:

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"Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance".

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Even Nehru's last will and testament was a work of literature. In it he asks that his body be cremated and a handful of his ashes thrown into the Ganges at Allahabad.

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He went on: "I have been attached to the Ganga and Januna Rivers in Allahabad ever since my childhood and, as I have grown older this attachment has also grown. I have watched their varying moods as the seasons changed, and have often thought of the history and myth and tradition and song and story that have become attached to them through the long ages and become part of their flowing waters.

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"The Ganga, especially, is the River of India beloved by her people round which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats. She has been India's age-long culture and civilisation, ever changing, ever flowing, and ever the same Ganga.

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"She reminds me of the snow-covered peaks and the deep valleys of the Himalayas, which I have loved so much, and of the rich and vast plains below where my life and work have been cast. Smiling and dancing in the morning sunlight, and dark and gloomy and full of mystery as evening shadows fall; a narrow, slow and graceful stream in winter, and a vast roaring thing during monsoon, broad bosomed almost as the sea, and with something of the sea's power to destroy, the Ganga has been to me a symbol and a memory of the past of India, running into the present and flowing on to the great ocean of the future.

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"The major portion of my ashes should, however, be disposed of otherwise. I want these to be carried high up into the air in an aeroplane and scattered from that height over the fields where the peasants of India toil, so that they might mingle with the dust and soil of India and become an indistinguishable part of India".

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The next time you visit a solicitor to update your will, you might like to compare texts!

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I have read many biographies of Churchill and while living in London in recent years was privileged to meet his grandson and be given a private tour of Chartwell by his great grandson. There are one thousand Churchill biographies to choose from and for years I thought the best Churchill biography I had read was by Roy Jenkins,

former Labour Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer and later Chancellor of Oxford University. By far the worst Churchill biography I've read was written by Boris Johnson. However, historian Andrew Roberts' more recent one volume biography "Walking with Destiny" is extraordinary and I rate it just above Jenkins' in the Churchill stakes. Roberts, now in the House of Lords, has previously written biographies of Napoleon and Tory grandees such as Lords Salisbury and Halifax. When a friend gave me his "Churchill" I wondered whether it would be a reheating of everything I'd read before and already knew. However, Roberts somehow makes an understanding of Churchill almost fresh again and taps into some surprising new sources including the diaries of King George the Sixth, recently made available unedited to historians for the first time. Roberts is clearly a great admirer of Churchill, who believed as a teenager that one day he would "save London and England from disaster" but avoids the usual hagiography by also exploring Churchill's many flaws, contradictions, misjudgements, catastrophic failures and sometimes crazy military theories that his frequently harassed generals had to talk him out of.

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To be honest I've found most political autobiographies to be disappointing, although I await with interest to see the forthcoming book by a leader I greatly admire, Jacinda Ardern, now based at Harvard. Last year a Liberal friend jibed that "she had only lasted half an hour as Prime Minister". I replied that she had lasted longer than Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull, Scott Morrison, Julia Gillard, Kevin Rudd, Paul Keating or Gough.

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In his memoir "Felicia" Don Dunstan did his wonderful career and his impact on this state and on Australia a disservice. "Felicia" read like it had been dictated in a hurry and didn't convey either Don's philosophy, personality or his courage, or the heady flavour of his time as Premier, let alone the triumphs and tragedies of his extraordinary life, public and private. I was very pleased more than thirty-five years later to be asked by Angela Woollacott to be of assistance when she was researching her much more comprehensive biography of Don published in 2019 which is certainly the best so far.

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One of the best political autobiographies I've ever read was "The Time of My Life" by the late Denis Healey, a senior Minister (Defence Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer) in the British governments of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan, and later Deputy Labour Leader to Michael Foot. Healey's book explores his own career against the backdrop of post war politics in Britain as the country painfully came to terms with its economic decline and retreating world role, with the dismantling of empire, the Suez debacle, the founding of NATO, the birth of the European Community and political choices such as nuclear deterrence or nuclear disarmament.

Rather than the usual self-serving, special pleading that pollutes most political memoirs, this beautifully written book is unusually candid as well as insightful. Healey, brilliant intellectually had, despite often being described in the media as

“avuncular”, a caustic wit and was often brutal in debates at party conferences, where he took on the left, and in the House of Commons where he pilloried the Tories. His inability to suffer fools probably cost him the party leadership and a spell at No 10. However, in his autobiography he is generous in ventilating the opinions of others, including political opponents from the Tory side of politics and those within his own party. On every page he reveals what Clive James described as his “well-furnished mind” in his assessments of his colleagues and opponents, but also of himself in ways that are at times self-deprecating. Healey was a hard headed, Verdi loving intellectual, multilingual, with a love of philosophy, literature, art, music of every kind and photography yet with a robust common touch that made him popular on current affairs programmes, in televised political debates and on variety shows such as Morcambe and Wise where he played the piano and cracked jokes. As Clive James also wrote “Healey never flaunted his culture but could not conceal it” and was “more interested in cultivating his mind than polishing his image.” During World War 2, this young Yorkshireman who had secured a double first at Oxford, rose to the rank of Major and was a beach master at the hell that was the Anzio landing. He was mentioned in dispatches twice. His experience in war steeled his ambition to build a better and fairer Britain in peace time. Healey had a rich and diverse hinterland, describing himself as an “eclectic pragmatist” and, like Kim Beazley here in Australia, is often regarded as the Prime Minister Britain should have had. “The Time of My Life” is in my view amongst the greatest British political autobiographies of the Twentieth Century. It is certainly one of the best written.

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Apart from politics I am also pretty much obsessed with books about War War 2. I guess this isn't surprising. My father fought with the Royal Tank Regiment at Dunkirk and Alamein, then with the Recce Regiment from the beaches of Sicily up through Italy to Austria, with the battle of Monte Cassino on the way. My mother worked in a factory making radio sets for Spitfires and both their family homes were destroyed during the Blitz. My Dad had agreed to be interviewed by me about his war. Unfortunately, he died suddenly aged 61 before that could happen. I have read many books in an attempt to trace his footsteps and have a better understanding of what he went through, and where, during his 6 years at war.

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Some of my favourite books on the War were written by the Australian author, Alan Moorehead. I particularly liked his “African Trilogy” about the desert war. Moorehead was a war correspondent for Britain's Daily Express covering the Eighth Army. As a result, his books have a fresh “just as it happened”, quality but in a way that connects what he is witnessing locally, on the ground, on the battlefield, with the bigger strategic picture. I also continue to admire Moorehead's award winning book “Gallipoli” published in 1956.

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With novels based on the War I loved Richard Flanagan's “The Narrow Road to the Deep North”, which won the Booker Prize. I'm so pleased that New Zealander, Rachel Gardner, one of my talented colleagues on the board of the South Australian Film Corporation is, along with Richard Flanagan, an Executive Producer on the television series being made based on this magnificent book. I am greatly enjoying

being the Chair of a screen agency that has pioneered and excelled in telling Australian stories as a mirror to ourselves and as a window for the world. Many of those stories have been based on books, including our early films such as Joan Lindsay's "Picnic at Hanging Rock", Colin Thiele's "Storm Boy" and "The Shiralee" by D'Arcy Niland.

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I am lucky to have a number of close friends who are authors such as Oxford science professor Baroness Susan Greenfield, former Director of the Royal Institution and one of our Adelaide Thinkers in Residence, whose books have been so important in improving the scientific literacy of the interested public, including me, and whose advice led us to establish the Science Exchange and the Australian Science Media Centre in Adelaide.

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I was also greatly influenced by a series of books by the wonderful Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki, such as "The Wisdom of the Elders" and former Australian of the Year Tim Flannery, with his brilliant "The Future Eaters". The advice of both David and Tim, was particularly influential in our developing climate policy, where South Australia, through its landmark legislation and impressive roll-out of renewables, is regarded as a leader internationally.

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Before discussing the book that probably most influenced me I should mention my friend Bob Ellis, author of so many books including "Things We Did Last Summer", "Goodbye Jerusalem", "Goodbye Babylon", "Night Thoughts In Time of War", "And So It Goes" and "And So It Went". Bob had, and continues to have, his admirers and his detractors and serious allegations were made against him several years after his death.

Ellis helped me, Bob Carr and other political leaders with speechwriting. Often, he would come up with a sentence or a paragraph that wrapped a political message with compelling imagery, even poetry. Ellis loved Adelaide, particularly at Festival time, and for him heaven was Writers Week, lying on a grassy knoll in warm dappled sunlight, occasionally falling asleep, or wandering around sipping cider with Jane Lomax Smith and me, but mostly listening to readings and talks by authors and thinkers and then carousing and jousting late at night with writers he knew or admired from around Australia and around the world.

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Ellis could be infuriating, iconoclastic and rage like King Lear against injustice or political enemies but he could also write like an angel: books, essays, film and theatre reviews, speeches, blogs, poems, plays like "The Legend of King O'Malley", and films like "Newsfront".

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Apart from books Bob's other love was politics. Ellis inhabited Labour politics, a permanent fixture at ALP conferences; dishevelled, lugging his ever present pillow and bags full of books and notebooks. The Labor Party's grumpy pet cat, always turning up, invited or not, camping in people's offices, sleeping under their desks. He stayed at our house for weeks at a time, which was sometimes

challenging. He once knocked on our bedroom door at 3.30am on the day of my campaign launch to tell me that I would win the election if I pledged to build airships for international travel rather than cars at the failing Mitsubishi plant.

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I believe that Ellis was Australia's greatest diarist, our Pepys or Boswell, with a touch of Hunter S Thompson thrown in. He chronicled election campaigns, including all of mine, capturing their atmosphere and personalities better than any, with their roller coaster ride of good and bad polls, debate gaffes, costing errors, attack and counterattack, intrigue and back room deals. On the other hand, he could also capture the nobility of the political process: particularly Election Day, democracy's communion with the people.

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Ellis was often accused of getting the facts wrong but more often than not got the truth right. I thought he was at his best when his writing explored character or loss with a sweet melancholy that was his hallmark. Bob added colour to our national tapestry and was part of that generation, that "push"—Germaine Greer, Barry Humphries, Clive James and Robert Hughes—who helped enlarge as well as define Australia. We need more like them to poke and prod us, to inspire, enrage and at times offend us without fear of being cancelled. It concerns me greatly to see pressure placed on the artistic directors and boards of respected and responsible writers' festivals, and even on universities, to ban writers and speakers because their legally expressed views differ from those of powerful lobby groups. Censorship is a slippery slope. Bullies always need to be resisted and it has shocked me how weak-kneed some sponsors of festivals have proven at the first whiff of grapeshot.

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So looking back to my youth, which book most influenced me? Close to the top were Dee Brown's "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee" and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovic" which I read as a first-year uni student while studying Soviet history and politics.

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Around that same time I also read Germaine Greer's passionate and wonderfully polemical "The Female Eunuch" which, like most of Germaine's later books, was designed to provoke, shock and offend as well as educate. It was one of the breakthrough books of the second wave of Feminism. More than fifty years later there are several messages in "The Female Eunuch" I still remember, such as: "Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them" and "Feminism has fought no wars. It has killed no opponents. It has set up no concentration camps, starved no enemies, practiced no cruelties. Its battles have been for education, for the vote, for better working conditions, for safety in the streets". The first draft of The Female Eunuch opened with "When a woman may walk on the streets of our cities alone, without insult or obstacle, at any pace she chooses, there will be no further need for this book". No wonder "The Female Eunuch" is still in print.

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After Germaine was arrested and charged for using indecent language because she said "bullshit" and "fuck" at a meeting at the Auckland Town Hall in 1972 I was one of



the protesters who joined Women's Liberation chanting the same words outside the Auckland Magistrate's Court. Unfortunately, things got out of control when a small group of male students threw eggs and tomatoes at police. One squishy tomato hit the most senior police officer present. The media reported that a riot ensued. A police paddy wagon was damaged, batons were drawn, blood was spilled and 17 students arrested. I quietly walked away. Germaine refused to pay her \$40 fine vowing never to return to New Zealand. The last time I saw her was at Bob Ellis' funeral.

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So here it is. The book that influenced me the most was "Black Like Me" by John Howard Griffin, published in 1961 and which I read a decade later when I was 18. It is the true story of a white man, born in Texas, who transformed his identity so that he could try to discover what it would be like to be a black man in the segregated American South during the time of Jim Crow laws and Ku Klux Klan, when drinking fountains, restaurants and lunch counters carried signs proclaiming "Whites Only". Griffin altered his appearance by shaving his head and changing the colour of his skin using sunlamps, applying a chemical stain and taking drugs used to treat a condition which causes the skin to lose pigmentation and develop white patches. Griffin journeyed across the South from New Orleans to Atlanta, through segregationist states like Alabama and Mississippi. He posed as someone looking for casual work. He reported his experiences, the insults from ticket sellers, shop assistants and bus drivers; the daily denigration and what he called the "hate stare" from white men and women on tramcars and buses, in waiting rooms and public toilets; the humiliating rejections and comments made during job interviews and on the streets.

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These days when "blackface" is rightly denounced, the premise and execution of Griffin's experiment would seem gimmicky, offensive, culturally inappropriate, even deemed racist. That wasn't the case when the book about Griffin's experiences was published in 1961. "Black Like Me" caused a sensation, sold ten million copies, was incorporated into school curricula and enraged racist whites in the southern states. The power of "Black Like Me" for a white American audience in 1961 was that it was told by one of their own.

Two years before Martin Luther King told a massive crowd in Washington that he wanted his children to be judged on the content of their character not the colour of their skin, here was a white man bearing actual witness to the humiliation and injustice of being judged on the colour of his skin, but only when he darkened it. Newsweek called the book "piercing and memorable." The New York Times hailed it as "an essential document of American life" but for Griffin there were consequences other than fame. He went on to champion racial equality and, encouraged by Martin Luther King, gave a thousand lectures on his experiences to white audiences but he and his family were often threatened by white segregationist thugs and even followed by police, but not for their protection. In Mississippi one night in 1964, while standing beside his car that had a flat tyre, Griffin was brutally beaten by Klansmen and left for dead. It took him five months to recover.

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Griffin temporarily changed the colour of his skin but also helped change America. I remember being profoundly moved by reading his book just as I was by reading about the abduction, torture, disfigurement and lynching of 14-year-old Emmet Till; the corrupt acquittal of his killers and his mother's courageous fight for justice. A few years ago, I visited the superb Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington DC. In there is Emmet Till's actual coffin that his mother insisted be left open at his funeral so that the world could see the brutality of racism and what it had done to her son. I stood there and saw elderly African Americans sob as they tried to explain the significance of the open casket to their grandchildren.

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So, more than 50 years later, what's now on my reading list. I am keen to read "Emperor of Rome-Ruling the Ancient Roman World" by Cambridge classicist Mary Beard, whose "SPQR" I have read and whose talks I enjoyed at last month's Adelaide Writers' Week. A friend has gifted me Richard Flanagan's latest book "Question 7" and a biography of Joseph Banks by Grantlee Kieza. I will take them back to our olive grove in Puglia to read during the northern summer, where I might try writing a few more poems. If I do, I will seek the advice of my friend, Adelaide poet Geoff Goodfellow, who has done so much to nourish an interest in poetry at schools and in prisons around Australia.

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In closing I want to thank the librarians and teachers of this state. What they do is invaluable but unfortunately not valued enough. Teachers make a huge difference to all our lives and to my life by encouraging me to go to university, the first in my family to do so, and to become involved in politics. I am so proud that my wonderful daughter Eleanor chose to be an English teacher. Her students are so lucky.

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Thank you for inviting me here this morning.