

## **DAME ANNABELLE RANKIN AWARD 2022**

### **Acceptance Speech: Michael Gerard Bauer**

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we stand – the Turrbal and the Jagera peoples and I pay my respect to Elders past, present and emerging and also to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here tonight.

My heartfelt thanks to the Governor of Queensland, Her Excellency Doctor Young for presenting me with this wonderful award, and to the selection panel of the Qld Branch of the CBCA for considering me worthy of being this year's recipient. I am in equal parts honoured, grateful and humbled. And still slightly stunned.

When I was informed that I would be receiving the **Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services for Children's Literature in Queensland** I was of course thrilled though a little unsure whether I deserved it or not. So I looked at the list of previous recipients. That was a mistake. As an author if you have to compare yourself to James Moloney, it's never going to end well.

While I know just about everyone on the list by name and reputation I also know many of them personally and so I am very much aware of the amazing contribution they each have made and continue to make to Children's Literature in this state and the absolute power-houses that they are. Not sure I'm a power-house - maybe more a generator that manages to fire-up every now and then. But I am very proud and thankful that the selection panel has seen fit to add my name to such a distinguished list.

Back when I was an English teacher I dreamed for a long time of being a published writer. But that's basically all I did, dream. I took a while to actually write anything. When I eventually did, my first success came in the 2003 Brisbane Writers Festival inaugural micro-short story competition. The stories had to be exactly 100 words in length. There were 600 entries. I wrote a short story on the art of short story writing featuring a short story writer who was short. I am nothing if not heavy-handed.

But I won and as well as some lovely prizes my story was printed in the Courier Mail and on small cardboard cards distributed around the Festival and on the back of the volunteers t-shirts. I was a published author at last – though mainly on cardboard and cotton.

As it turned out however not all of my 100 words were to be printed on each shirt. The story was cut up into phrases of three or four words and those phrases along with my name featured on the back of the shirts. I remember seeing one shirt that just had the vague phrase 'and to the' on it, but still thinking proudly, 'I wrote that!'

In the same week I was told I'd won that competition I received a phone call from Dyan Blacklock publisher at Omnibus Books/Scholastic Australia telling me that she'd just spent all day reading the Young Adult manuscript I'd submitted, that she loved it and she wanted to publish it. It remains the best phone-call of my life.

Before that first book *The Running Man* was released I remember Dyan predicting that I would love being a part of the writing community. And she was absolutely right. Both about the love I would have for it and about the strong sense of community I would find.

Whatever success I've had as a writer has been enabled, supported and amplified by so many people and groups within that community – publishers, organisations like the CBCA and Book links and many more; Writing Centres; dedicated teachers and teacher-librarians; state and federal governments that have provided writing grants and book awards; literary festival organisers and the myriad of volunteers who make them possible, wonderful independent bookshops, reviewers, awards judges and my fellow writers and illustrators who have provided a constant source of friendship and encouragement and advice along the way. The list goes on.

And for just a few examples of support I've received I don't have to look any further than that the previous recipients for this award.

The first class I ever got invited to speak to as a published author was one belonging to **Judith Russell**.

The first author to ask me to launch a book for them even though I had only published one thing and he was already a legend was **James Moloney**.

The best article ever written promoting me and my books was one that appeared in *Magpies* magazine and it was written by **Leonie Tyle**.

The first Fellowship I was ever awarded was through the May Gibbs Literary Trust an organisation that **Lyn Linning** and **Judith Russell** have work tirelessly for over many years.

The last launch I had for one of my books just a month or so ago was made possible by **Fiona Stager** and her staff at the brilliant *Where The Wild Things Are*.

The last Literary Festival I was invited to present at was the recent Ipswich Story Arts festival run by **Jenny Stubbs**.

I am so appreciative of all the support I've been given by so many people over my writing career. I hope I've managed to repay at least a portion of that.

In some ways my whole writing journey started because of a simple childhood memory out of which grew my first novel *The Running Man*. The memory was as a young boy of looking for silkworms on a big mulberry tree in the backyard of our family home in Ashgrove.

At the time I didn't realise that even though silkworms eat mulberry leaves there are no wild silkworms on any mulberry trees in Australia. So I foolishly kept searching and as I continued to find nothing, I became more angry and frustrated.

Eventually I came up with a solution. Because I was raised in a Catholic family and had been told the prayer can move mountains, I decided to make up a special silkworm prayer. It was sure to work because I didn't even want to move a mountain I just wanted to move a grub onto a leaf. So I closed my eyes, said my special silkworm prayer and then reached out blindly and the first leaf I touched I pulled from the tree hopeful that the power of my prayer would work.

I remember I held the leaf in front of me, slowly opened my eyes and looked down. Not surprisingly there was nothing there. But then I turned the leaf over to the other side. And looked down. And there, on the underside of the leaf, near the spine was ... absolutely nothing. Because there are no silkworms on any mulberry trees in Australia.

I left the mulberry tree in tears that day but later that afternoon as I sat in our living room watching TV, my big brother Robert came in through the back door carrying a shoebox and placed it on the dining room table. He called me over and said, 'Look at what some kid down the road just gave me.' I went over to the table and when Rob took off the lid of the shoebox, inside on a bed of mulberry leaves were dozens and dozens of big silkworms.

I'd hoped and prayed for just one silkworm and for whatever reason, I'd ended up with a whole box full. It was a day I would never forget.

Well to me that happy childhood memory is exactly like my writing career.

I started off hoping and dreaming just to get one thing published and to be able hold that thing that I'd written in my hands but somehow I've ended up standing here in front of you tonight accepting this award.

And along the way to my amazement there have been other publications, overseas editions, audio recordings, stage productions, short-listing and awards, hundreds of school visits and festival appearances around Australia as well as overseas and much more. I even got to play songs I had written for one of my books with a German rock band on stage in Munich at an international children's festival held in the grounds of a 14<sup>th</sup> castle. Perhaps even more amazingly I was able to earn my living as a writer.

Back when I was fantasising about being a published author, I didn't have anywhere near the confidence or imagination needed to dream such things were possible. But I somehow ended up being that little kid in his Ashgrove backyard again. Hoping for maybe one silkworm but to his amazement, getting a whole box full.

Dame Annabelle Rankin after whom this award is named was such a strong and capable and amazing woman so I'd like to finish up by mentioning the amazing women who are most responsible for me being here tonight.

Firstly my wife **Adriana** who when I came home one day without warning and informed her that I had just resigned from my teaching job to have a go at writing decided to support me rather than divorce me.

**Dyan Blacklock** the then publisher at Omnibus Books/Scholastic Australia who pulled my manuscript from the slush pile, whose phone-call changed my life and who guided, nurtured and grew my career with such skill and care for many years.

And Celia Jellett who edited nearly all of my books and who told me that her job was to make my stories the best they could be. And she always did.

And finally my admiration and appreciation go to all the strong, capable and amazing women who continue to be the life-blood and the main driving force of the Children's Literature community in Queensland.

My sincere thanks again to the QLD Branch of the CBCA for this honour. I hope there are still a few more silkworms left for me to find and I hope I can continue to play my part in helping and encouraging others find theirs. This award has certainly motivated and inspired me to do so.