

The Word according to Bryce

In the movie *The Apostle*, Robert Duvall plays a self-righteous preacher. He travels life's path with evangelical zeal to enlighten his fellow man about the word. He fervently pleads for people to repent. Likewise Mr. Bryce Courtenay comes across as a man with a mission. It was evident that he enjoys his role as public speaker when he performed to a large crowd of authors, illustrators, teachers, librarians and storytellers at Dromkeen. Just north of Melbourne at Riddell's Creek, Dromkeen is a museum devoted to showcasing the talents of some of Australia's and overseas finest children's authors and illustrators.

His humorous stories were laced with passionate political pleas. Pleas for our stolen generation, pleas for an apology from our Prime Minister and pleas to teach our children a somewhat old-fashioned approach to the reading and writing process. The need to feed their minds and souls.

The audacity of the man, telling a room full of people devoted to children's literature to pull up our socks. He preached to us about poor literacy rates in Australia. Courtenay then told us of his company, Kids Core that is developing 'new' literacy programs. But the informational brochure that arrived on request from the company only talked about the creatures involved in Yowie Powie and their relation to the environment. An annoying marketing item that produces rubbish and tantrums at supermarket checkouts whilst introducing children to the animals of Australia.

He did seem to get a little hot under the collar as he went on. A joke that depicted Australian's as a nation looking for a good time and handouts, with a 'they owe us' mentality. He urged John Howard to take the first step towards reconciliation. 'We are a polyglot nation that has experienced four major migrations and we are at a milestone in our development as a nation.' 'Economic rationalization will lead to our downfall' 'Our country is where our soul is.'

All very passionate stuff but just off the mark when talking to this room full of creative people. A group dedicated to feeding the minds and souls of Australia's children with inspirational artwork, literature and its promotion. Standard platitudes handed down to us from his platform. Nothing to inspire, rather a reprimand.

One on one he seems smaller and quieter but still a focus on his own bandwagon.

During our interview I related my love for strong female characters in the story's I tell, but now with a son I wondered what he considered were some of the great male literary heroes? Was it because he's running hot with his latest book *Jessica*, 'the story of a remarkable young Australian woman' that his response was that males need to look to these great female characters. That they'd been largely ignored in Australia and that's why it was important to tell their stories, like the story of *Jessica*. An old marketing adage, it pays to promote, was evident in the weeks leading up to Christmas because book shelves, groaned under the wait of so many *Jessica*'s.

When pressed, but what about the great literary heroes like Beowulf and Robin Hood and Cuchulain? 'Yes but they had to be nursed and feed and nurtured, Maid Marion probably played an important part in Robin's life.' This was followed with a matter of fact report that he was rejected by his poor, slightly neurotic mother and suckled by a large African woman with enveloping mammaries and a welcoming lap. A woman of the Zulu nation who suckled

him and nurtured him with stories for the first five years of his life and introduced him to the importance of the way tales are related. It is no surprise then, that women and stories became inextricably linked in his early formative years.

It is evident that he has a great respect for women's role as the matriarch's of family life and their assumed responsibility for the continuity of the tribe. He quotes facts and figures about the age range of our convict settlers and explains that this country has a strong Irish flavour, because it was Irish Women who lived longer than all their counterparts and that they had such a strong oral tradition. Courtenay employs fulltime researchers to help him with his work and collect data such as this.

He finds feminism exciting and believes our next emerging wave of leading lights in the community will be women.

He fervently believes that people are born with genetic encoding and all the myths and legends of 'their people' are already stored inside. For Courtenay this is the Celtic people. He likened 'encoding' to a vast desert land at night, where oil refinery's covered with lights tower against the star speckled heavens. He believes, like the refinery, people tap down to a source of pools, into different areas of learning and understanding and mythologies.

He believes with his own writing that he is like an 'intellectual stenographer' that doesn't invent the stories but merely translates them from this great pool of inherited knowledge. 'He hears the voices and he experiences the landscape through the blood flow of his family line'

This lead to another question, this time about our relationship to the land. He believes that the Celts haven't yet made this essential connection to the land because up until now they have largely ignored the indigenous culture. We need to accept their lore as part of our ethos and until we do we will not reach our full potential. The Celts jealously hold onto their inherited mythology and keep looking back, instead of trying to understand the rich cultural heritage of our land.

Courtenay is the benefactor of the Australian Storytelling Guild's, N.S.W's branch and proud to be but had a ' little bit of criticism' of some professional storytellers. ' He believes that some of them learn their stories verbatim, so they actually know every minute of the story and they leave no ability to surprise themselves. The whole thing about a story is that you build on it. Some seem to tell the story without listening to it, and without adding new material, without seeing new observations, any new angles or nuances.' He encouraged storytellers to live with their stories and allow them to evolve. I understand his point, my stories always evolve with each telling, and it is only because of subsequent telling's that you come to feel them and breathe with them.

Bryce Courtenay is a man of strong convictions; he readily acknowledges the power of myths and storytelling. He creates his stories by calling on his genetic and environmental inheritance, listening to the voices of his people and mixing it with the contemporary times and forces he lives with, 'like a bowl of museli with many ingredients thrown in.

It is easy to look to his marketing background and wonder how many tricks of the trade he employs with his literary blockbusters. But the man's bestseller record is remarkable, not to mention his prolific output. He can seem a little smug with some of his pronouncements but this is a man who is firm about his beliefs and whose position and acumen make him a man

of great power. It is good to have someone in high places that are fervent about reconciliation, understanding the stories of our land and the importance of literary traditions.

He is a man with considerable marketing skills and you wonder if he will sell you just the sizzle and not the steak. But he comes across as genuinely and passionately interested in the importance of storytelling in people's lives. He knows that a person fired with conviction makes a great storyteller, while he demonstrates that a lot of time and hard work goes into perfecting the art form. He believes in the continuum of storytellers in all cultures and the genetic linking of people from the earliest of time.

He has struck a cord with people with his expansive stories and he knows how to promote them

His business skills are legendary so I asked him for some clues on how storytellers could promote themselves to a wider audience. Alas, he stated that storytelling was at a distinct disadvantage as an art form. Because it is not on radio and television or in the newspapers it is not seen as a valid. However, once you get an audience, any audience it immediately becomes valid if you know your craft. So there is only one way, go looking for your audience, the audience won't come to you.

Finally, to quote from Bryce Courtenay's *A Recipe for Dreaming*

'Each of us has been designed for one of two immortal functions, either as storyteller or as a cross-legged listener to tales of wonder, love and dreaming. When we cease to listen, then we no longer exist as people. Dead men tell no tales.'

Where one could sometimes bristle at Courtenay's righteousness, one also has to accept that the above adage is true. If we claim to belong to the immortal role as storytellers, we also need to accept the responsibilities. It is evident after talking to Courtenay that we must work hard with passionate vigour to tell the grand stories of life's experiences.