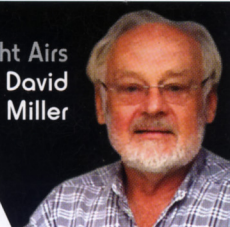


# Ubud Writers and Readers Festival 2014

Light Airs  
David  
Miller



IT WAS A LAID back affair. It was action-packed. Centred on the palatial Indus restaurant over an October long weekend, the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival in 2014 was dedicated to Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge and a shuttle bus fed aspiring writers and their readers to the various events around Bali's artistic hilltop town.

Book lovers travel a long way to join these festivals, to see and hear the great ones for inspiration, to touch them for luck and queue for book signing ceremonies. As evidence of this craving, all the workshops on how to write, such as 'stretch your story's potential' were quickly oversubscribed.

Another one called 'Good Script Ratio' was led by Rolf de Heer, writer, director and producer of acclaimed movies, including *Ten Canoes*, *The Tracker* and his most recent production, *'Charlies Country'*. In spite of his warning that 'a good script is 95% perspiration and 5% inspiration,' it was impossible to buy or bribe a way in, to learn firsthand his secret card system but that was compensated with an introductory showing of *'Charlies country'*, one of the many free events at the festival. It was there that Rolf spoke openly about his relationship with David Gulpilil, 'more of a brother than a friend' who he was happy to report had stopped drinking, sadly though the underlying reason he missed playing in *'Ten Canoes'*.

Without wishing to labour the point, while outside Australia, I learned heaps about our indigenous culture from the prominent Aboriginal presence. Maybe it was more relaxed in a neutral country. Elder Clarrie Cameron, an older man with the ambience of an outback stockman gave a very understandable explanation of skin relationships in the Nghanhagardi tribe.

'If your mother-in-law comes into the



“The woman in your life who must be obeyed is the grand-daughter”

room, you just pull your hat over your eyes, but the woman in your life who must be obeyed is the grand-daughter'. There was much more, to which anyone with a family could easily relate.

There were lots of opportunities to sit back and be entertained by people from many lands, passionate in their diverse interests. Indonesia was well represented from many angles. A brave young woman from a tiny out of the way island reported through an interpreter how the navy had

arrived and dynamited their local reef for a quick fish kill, then left the local people bereft of their sea resources

David Leser spoke about his memoir, *'In the Shadow of My Father'* and explored the area of privileged communication. Every morning his father, a traumatised refugee would retch in the bathroom. He objected to his son's inclusion of this in the memoir, stating that 'What happens in the bathroom stays in the bathroom.' Leser struggled but put it in anyway to keep integrity of story.

Doctors considering the memoir about their medical life might reflect on this dilemma around duty of care in confidentiality.

The writer I really enjoyed hearing was the imaginative and engaging Amitav Ghosh, in a live radio interview with Michael Cathcart for the ABC. He pointed out that a moviemaker has imagery and music to work with, but a writer "has only words". He has an impressive line-up of historical fiction, *'The Glass Palace'*, *'the Hungry Tide'* and I anxiously await release of the final in his trilogy, *'Sea of poppies'* and *'River of Smoke'*. These fictional accounts bring alive nineteenth century characters, exploring the opium trade. Fortunes made then have been handed down the line to this day, according to the author, a fit looking man with a shock of white hair contrasting his brown face.

'Historical fiction writing,' he claimed 'is closer to what actually happened than in academic history, more what it was like to live there'. In this vein he spoke of the *Lascars*, the sailors of the day. It was a generic term, encompassing a multicultural group, a mixture of Malays, Philippine, Chinese and others, who shared a pidgin seafaring language used freely by his characters.

He explained how expendable they were in the dangerous business of sailing ships. If a man fell out of the heaving mast into the sea, there was no going back. If he fell onto the deck and broke a leg, he might cast himself overboard, there being no hope of healing or future employment.

In his opinion, written language in the nineteenth century was more opaque than now. Surprisingly, He singled out George Orwell as one who introduced rules of written language, aided by a new authority, the Oxford English Dictionary.

The ideas presented may be true or fanciful, but always refreshing. Normally a university course is needed for exposure of literary ideas, or a shortcut, the writers festival.



Some of the engaging speakers at the palatial Indus restaurant where the festival was held.