It is with immense pleasure and intense pride that I accepted the invitation to launch this extraordinary collection of writings by Australian authors: pleasure that the book is a rich harvest from our own authors; pride that their writing makes me hold my head high.

The volume, *A Country Too Far*, is a collection of 28 pieces by 27 of our most remarkable writers: poetry, fiction, memoir, essays, on a theme that defines the heart of our society, deepens its moral centre and questions our ethical stature as individuals. It is, therefore, appropriate that a book of this depth and quality should be launched in the national capital, the heart of the nation, in its centenary year. *A Country Too Far* is an evocative and resonant title suggested, I believe, by Ngareta Rossell.

To Rosie and Tom one can pay the deepest tribute for bringing to our reading intelligence these pieces of stunning power with such lyrical beauty and ethical depth. Rosie and Tom are our celebrated writers: what is most wonderful to see is that they had the time, energy and commitment to write to so many writers – many who supported the project but couldn’t contribute due to other commitments – to see how profoundly and poignantly these writers have imagined the life of others so different and distant from our own.

This, of course, is the gift of finest literature. The literary imagination is the essential ingredient in empowering the powerless, making us see the invisible. The treatment of Asylum Seekers in our nation is not only a moral issue: it is political and personal, national and regional. Its echoes are universal and heard beyond our shores. It creates an image of us in the educated consciousness of others. It mirrors our life too.

The public debate the volume is likely to generate on a vital subject – with its biblical resonance, holocaust’s historical memory, the settlement of Australia and its colonial consequences – is imperative in our society. Australia is not a big power but, I believe, it can play a huge role in creating a humane literacy in our part of the world. We have the means and the people to make that difference.

*A Country Too Far* makes us imagine the situation of someone different yet so close to us. To give these faceless men and women and their nameless children a dignity and individuality is a major contribution towards humane conduct for they provide the insights into a nation’s compassionate imagination. It might just touch our conscience with a sense of justice and in the shaping of future policies in our Parliament.

I’ve read every word on every page – rarely have I read a book that engaged my moral being with such numinous words and epiphanic moments.

Rosie’s Introduction, so movingly and thoughtfully written, raises the issues that writers discuss philosophically and poetically. The language on Asylum Seekers, says the editor, has been debased in the political discourse and our media, even in our writing and academia. They are defined and demonised as terrorists – race and religion are both intertwined here – no-one talks of Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish terrorism – many acts of terrorism are immediately perceived as Islamic. Once that is done, like a racial definition, no further thought is necessary.

---

1 This book is reviewed in the same issue of *Transnational Literature* (Volume 6, no. 2, May 2014).
All this is creatively questioned in the writings here in the portrayal of personal tragedies in a language of clarity, compassion and searing beauty that makes art into life. Both tenderness and love shine through even the most grim darkness of the boat people drowning in the waves of our prejudices and indifference. The human drama and pathos find expression in words as ordinary as our daily bread.

In a book, meticulously and compellingly researched, titled *Your Fatwa Doesn’t Apply Here*, published earlier this year, law professor and human rights activist, Karima Bennoune, tells of thousands of Muslims who struggle against fundamentalist violence and their bravery is hardly reported in the our media. For example between 2006 and 2008, 98% of al-Qaida victims were Muslims. Facts can enlarge our understanding of good and evil in the garden of myth-making. In this collection our writers have focused their forensic intelligence on the issues, the details and larger questions of our humanity. The gift of eloquence is their gift to us.

To see this book as merely about asylum seekers is to miss the most fundamental point: it IS about us as a people, a community, a nation – the journeys they make is also part of our mindset and deeply embedded in our national culture and personal histories, in the very foundations our being and becoming.

The writer’s duty is to ask the good questions – let the politicians, public servants, academics and soldiers, come up with the answers – after all, the community pays them for thinking. To find solutions and there’s always a solution if we’ve the will and goodwill.

I could mention a litany of examples, moving and heartrending, that litter the pages of this anthology as dead bodies fitfully seen in the waves of the ocean. You’ll have to buy the book to discover for yourselves – our distinguished writers have done their job. We may well ask what is ours?

Words like disgrace, shameful, disgusting, do not create a sense of our shared responsibility, our complicity – these are words that condemn merely policies and parties. What the writers do here are more, much more –they challenge our own sense of the Other. Our capacity for empathy: it’s not just the tyranny of distance; it is really the tyranny of difference.

As Rosie says, the writers do it with grace – their stories show how closely our own histories mirror those of the Asylum Seekers and how our fate is only a heartbeat away from theirs. The future may be just a boat away or an island too far.

May I be personal: In April 1987 we had won the elections in Fiji after almost 20 years of racially elitist rule by a colonial hierarchy. Even before we could settle in our seats of petty power, six Sri Lankan refugees arrived at Nadi Airport, the place of my birth. The Labour Coalition Government of Fiji, of which I was a member, declared that these people must be sent back to civil war-torn Sri Lanka. It was a unanimous decision: not a single dissenting voice was raised, I’m ashamed to say.

Within a month Colonel Rabuka made half the population of Fiji desperately seek refugee status in New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere. New Zealand was more generous, although 60,000 labourers were cozened and indentured to Fiji to serve primarily the sugar interests of the CSR company of Sydney.\(^2\) No member of my family had ever migrated outside Fiji – and today almost 80 percent of my extended family is in New Zealand.

Life can change so suddenly, so devastatingly. A moment can be eternity depending on what it contains. The stain of refusing refuge to those Sri Lankans is an indelible stain on my

\[^2\] 60,000 Indian indentured labourers were recruited from 1879 to 1920 to work on the sugar estates of the CSR Company of Australia to give the British colony some economic viability.
conscience – I should have spoken; my words could have changed the PM’s thinking; he was a friend and often I used to write his speeches and Press releases. I could have made a difference – a small but significant one. I think knowing the truth and not speaking up is worse than telling lies. I remained silent – that’s my sorrow, my shame. Since then I’ve been haunted by the fate of displaced persons – thousands of them.

In June 2004 I launched a book in the precincts of Federal Parliament: *Refuge Australia: Australia’s Humanitarian Record* by Professor Klaus Neumann. That launch was chaired by Tanya Plibersek, now ALP’s Deputy Leader.

In 2007 I was invited to launch a book *Writing the Pacific* edited by Kavita Nandan and Jen Webb – for reasons subterranean, I quoted the poem ‘Refugee Blues’, written in 1939, by W.H Auden: here are a few lines:

*Saying this city has ten million souls
Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes
Yet there’s no place for us, my dear, yet there’s no place for us.

…
The consul banged the table and said;
‘If you’ve got no passport you’re officially dead’;
*But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.*

…
*Stood on a great plain in the falling snow;
Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro;
Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.*

I’d read this in year 10 in my secondary school on a river’s bank. That evening at the University of the South Pacific it came to me with a revenant force and subconscious power of the familiar.

All of us have presumably read *Dark Victory* by David Marr and Marion Wilkinson, Peter Mares’ *Borderline*, *A Watching Brief* by Julian Burnside, Robert Manne’s essay ‘What do we Fear?’; Christos Tsiolkas’s brilliant piece ‘Why We Hate Refugees’ in the September issue of the *Monthly* – the Canberra community is literate and well-informed, I’m told – and numerous other pieces by writers, journalists, academics, and judges, and testimonies of thousands who work and give hope to the Asylum Seekers. These are acts of true heroism. In reading and respecting such people our own self-respect is enhanced.

*A Country Too Far* will give you glimpses of the heartrending true-to-life stories but they will also brighten hope when you read lines like these:

The lies, the lies. The lies of the shock jocks, but worse than that the lies of our elected leaders…

It is true that our ancient, thin-soiled, fragile continent cannot take everyone … a country founded on the sweat of the poorest, most despised outcasts of nineteenth-century society, a country that saw those people come together to forge one of the best and fairest and most prosperous nations the world has ever seen, might make a different choice, a radical choice. Such a country might make a more generous choice, and take the people more like our forebears – the despised poor, the desperate, the brave, the driven people who risk everything they have to get here and give their kids a better life.
That would be a policy my dad would recognise.

This is the last sentence of a piece which began: ‘I’m pretty sure that for much of his life my father was an illegal immigrant.’

A friend of mine recently sent me his book *Hamlet’s Dream: The Robben Island Shakespeare.*

*Hamlet’s Dream* tells the story of the notorious Robben Island prison where Nelson Mandela and his companions were jailed. They were Hindus, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Communists and Socialists – many sentenced for 30 years. But they survived in their solidarity with a copy of Sonny Venkatrathnam’s Alexander edition of the complete works of Shakespeare. They read and marked their favourite passages. That is inspiring: that Literature can be so deeply sustaining in such abject circumstances: to be confined to a solitary prison and yet be the king of infinite space through a writer’s work.

But the more devastating piece in *Hamlet’s Dream* is on home – asylum seekers leave their homeland to find a home and, it’s here, my friend David Schalkwyk comments – that home can also be strange, alien, uncanny a place of violence and self-destruction. The Macbeths turn their home and country into a slaughter house; Lear dismembers his country and family only to cast himself out into the wilderness; Othello finds in his new home the horror of his own self-betrayal and blind violence; Coriolanus declares of his home, there’s a world elsewhere; and Hamlet returns home from the university to find it a prison.

Something is truly rotten in the state of Denmark.

Australia is home to us.

We might have begun as a prison but we live in perhaps the freest country in the world, in a sense; in another sense we’re still prisoners of what Robert Manne calls our ‘ancient anxieties of race’. What makes a home great is when there’s place in it for the homeless.

Literature may not make us more just or humane but when you read this wonderful collection you’ll see that it sharpens our sense of justice and injustice and questions ideas of our personal humanity. That I think is the priceless gift of good writing – and this volume accomplishes it with compelling creativity and poetic grace. Its eloquence will echo in the hearts and minds of many, I feel.

In a footnote, the co-editor and our most prolific writer, Tom Keneally writes:

As this book goes to press I am horrified to receive figures from the Organisation ChilOut that show we now have the highest number of children in detention we have ever had in modern era … We who apologised to the Stolen Generations will have much to apologise for to those children who ultimately become Australian. Apology, however, will validate but not ease the present pain.

Gillian Triggs, President of the Australian Human Rights Commission, in her report published on October 2, 2013, concludes:

Australia’s share of asylum applications remains a very small fraction of the global total (2.2%). I urge the Australian Government to ensure that all asylum seekers and refugees are treated humanely regardless of their mode of arrival, and to continue to uphold our proud history of providing protection to some of the world’s most persecuted and vulnerable people.
And this protection you won’t get in Nauru – the island created by birds’ droppings: where there are no lakes with withered sedges and no birds sing. I don’t know if you have ever visited that most desolate and god-forgotten island. And to think Australia – this vast land – is sending refugees to these islands and calling it the Pacific Solution – why not the Paradise Solution? Such a big country with so small a heart? Even small islands are not spared our inhumanity: it gives you a sinking feeling.

When you read this collection, the question will arise: Can writers make a difference? I believe books like this do. They should be essential reading in every classroom and the prophetic voice of a writer can be heard into that far country – our conscience. And the near constituency our classroom. After all, most changes are made by the voices and words of a few individuals.

In 1999 I attended the CHOGM meeting held in Durban. My aim was to visit Pietermaritzburg, about 80 kms from Durban. I wanted to see the railway station where Gandhi was ejected from the train on a winter’s night on 7 June 1893 around 10pm. He was a 23-year-old dandy lawyer, recently returned from London. When I visited this station, more than a century later, that evening the station was deserted and the place looked desolate with its low-ceilinged station against a low darkening sky. What moved me most was that this young man had dared to raise his voice in that wilderness – and that voice is still heard. And which hand wrote more than Gandhi’s? Nothing was too small for him.

I do believe that our Australian writers have an enduringly significant role to play. We’ve PEN; some of us are proud members of it. And it has done wonders for writers and journalists in prisons. But perhaps we may think of something more for our region – A Parliament of Writers. It’s not as absurd as it sounds – judging from our many Parliaments. There’s a Parliament of Religions; in Strasbourg, there’s a Parliament of Writers – Wole Soyinka and Salman Rushdie have been its past Presidents.

You might not only attract writers to be its members but many a deposed MPs and PMs. And not necessarily from Fiji alone.

This anthology of writing, says a writer, is an act of imagining the lives of others, and such an act of compassion is holy as any. It is an act designed to make sure we do not stop ourselves from imagining, properly and in every human detail, the plight of Asylum Seekers in this country. And it is an act designed to make sure that we do not stop there; that we do something. We need to honour our obligations to them, and to ourselves. It is truly the sum of us all and all that you and I are and our children are likely to be.

May I, therefore, urge you to read this marvellous collection of writings from our most awarded and honoured writers. Buy your copies – so elegantly edited by Rosie and Tom, and so attractively designed and published by Penguin Viking Australia.

It is with pride and joy I launch this book here in Canberra, Jyoti’s and my home, with our three children and three grandchildren.

---

**Satendra Nandan** is a former MP and cabinet minister in the Bavadra Government in Fiji and a member of the Fiji Constitution Commission, 2012. An award-winning writer and academic, he is currently Emeritus Professor at the Donald Horne Institute of Creative and Cultural Research at the University of Canberra.