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Writing in a Pandemic

Opening Speech of the Section Children's and Young Adult Literature
at the 20th international literature festival berlin

Good evening, and thank you for inviting me here today. When I said yes to this invitation back in early March, the world was a very different place. For a while, I wasn't even sure I was going to make it here in person. I'm delighted that it all worked out, and tonight I'd like to talk about something which has been a real personal struggle for me over the last couple of months. What is the role of a writer in a time of social upheaval? How do you write in the middle of a global pandemic? I mean this question both practically – how do you do it? - and creatively. How will all of the talented people here tonight take this experience and turn it into art? And how *should* we do so? What responsibilities do we have as writers, and particularly as writers for young people?

Virginia Woolf famously said that in order to write, a woman needed money and a room of her own. In 2020 I still have both of those things, though many writers – particularly those whose income is derived from performance and teaching – do not. But I would like if I may to add to Ms Woolf's coda. In order to write in a pandemic, a woman needs money and a room of her own, a clear mental space to think, nothing urgent that needs arranging, longer than two hours at a time to work, a quiet house with nobody shouting "Mummy!", the ability to make herself a cup of coffee without being tackle-hugged by two small children, and am I sounding bitter? I am bitter.

When Britain entered lockdown in March, my husband and I were living in a tiny two-bedroom house with a four-year-old and a one-year-old. My husband's work were understanding about the situation, and we divided the day into two-and-a-half hour chunks. One of us would work and the other would educate and entertain the children. Every two and a half hours, we would swap. I am fortunate to have a husband who is a practical feminist; a study by the Office of National Statistics in Britain found that women, on average, were doing 50% more childcare in lockdown than men.

Our schedule seemed like a good idea in theory, but in practice it was death to creativity. Some writers work to coffee shop noises. I worked to a soundtrack of "Mummy!" and "He took my car!" and "Waaaaa!" and the occasional, "For God's sake, everybody stop screaming!" Sometimes it was me who did the screaming.

Even when they went out, it took most of my working time to get my head out of 'parent-mode' and into 'writing mode'. I was usually just beginning to get into something when my shift ended, and I was back on junk-modelling and dishwasher-loading duty. When my children's school and nursery finally open in June, I was dazzled by the difference those empty six hours a day made. I rewrote a 20,000-word novel in five weeks. Honestly, it was amazing.

But at the beginning of the pandemic, I was trying to claw creative space from a world which was literally screaming for my attention. And while the numbers of the dead and the dying multiplied around me, while everyone online had an urgent and clearly wrong opinion about our government's strategy, I was supposed to be writing a novel for reluctant readers about blogging. I

did not care about blogging. None of my readers cared about blogging. The whole book was set in a world which had disappeared, at least temporarily. After a week of staring at my laptop, I made a decision. I could not write this book. But I had to write something, for the sake of my bank balance, my deadlines, for my sanity.

What do people write about in disasters? In theory, lockdown should be a gift of a subject for a writer for young people. Children taken out of school and left alone to entertain themselves while their parents work is a classic opening chapter. But all of the agents and publishers I know are wincing somewhat as they brace themselves for an onslaught of picture books about rainbows, children's novels about helping neighbours, and young adult novels about teenagers solving mysteries and fighting villains while the rest of the world is locked down. And do spare a thought for the poor adult agents, facing an inbox full of literary novels about lonely middle-aged men finding meaning in isolation.

And can you write meaningfully about something while living through it? Wordsworth famously said that poetry 'takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity'. And the memoirist and poet Mary Karr wrote that a writer may need to wait seven or eight years until after a traumatic event before we understand it enough to write about it. A diary or a piece of journalism – no matter how excellent – is not the same thing as a poem or a novel or a memoir. One is immediate. The other needs time to emerge.

I am not so sure about this one. It is true that the great novel of the First World War – Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* – was not published until 1929. But if Wilfred Owen, who was killed a week before the Armistice, had waited until the end of the war to start his war poetry, it would never have been written.

Neil Gaiman memorably said that in times of trouble you should 'make good art'. It sounds so simple, doesn't it? I'm trying, Neil! But while this pandemic is a tragedy for many, my personal trauma is mostly domestic, and really rather dull. There is not a novel in my attempts to teach number bonds to my son, and getting hold of the last roll of toilet paper in the shop is not the dramatic climax I would have chosen. And do I really want to write about my own life anyway? I'm a novelist! I make stuff up! Writing as therapy is a neat idea, but does it really work in practice?

The poet Kate Clanchy says that writing about a personal trauma: "Orders the experience it recounts and gives the writer a grip on it. And if they make a good poem out of the truths of their lives, then that is not just control, but power. It is different from being happy; it isn't a cure for anything, but it is profoundly worth having."

This is where I segue into the obligatory section on the power of literature, because framing *any* sort of experience gives it power. Was lockdown a noble endeavour to save lives and protect our essential workers? Or was it a government hoax to control us and take away our liberties? Does

wearing a mask make you a hero or a pussy? Is mask-wearing an act of kindness, or of anxiety, or of suppression? Was this pandemic caused by climate change, or 5G, or was it something which the World Health Organisation have been telling us to prepare for for years? As any psychologist will tell you, the stories we tell have a profound affect on our lived experience. The words we use to name things change them. Plague. Pestilence. Coronavirus. Flu. Kung Flu. Pandemic. Cold. Hoax. We are living through something remarkable, and the stories we tell about it could literally save lives. And I'm not just talking about the Great Corona Novel, but the stories we tell at the school gate, or online when we really ought to be working. Patrick Ness, who opened this festival in 2014, once called writers for young people pied pipers, leading the children away from the corrupt politicians to strange new lands of opportunity. It's a nice image. Pay your freelancers, people, or we might do the same to you!

Perhaps the truth is simply that writers are people and people are all different. Some of us compose poetry in tranquillity. And some of us, like Wendy Cope, do not. In her poem *An Argument with Wordsworth*, she wrote:

I have emotion - no one who knows me could fail to detect it -

But there's a serious shortage of tranquillity in which to recollect it.

So this is my contribution to the theoretical debate:

Sometimes poetry is emotion recollected in a highly emotional state.

We've now reached the point in this speech where I tell you all what you 'should' be writing, and I can see a few hackles rising already. Relax! People often tell writers for young people what we ought to be doing, which would be very helpful if they didn't all disagree with each other. I'm wary of anyone who says books for young people 'should ...' be anything. I'm sure this doesn't need to be said to anyone in this room, but young adult literature is not a genre. It is sometimes funny, sometimes gritty, sometimes poetical, sometimes fantastical, sometimes speculative, sometimes sad. It is safe and it is highly dangerous. It shows us new worlds and it shows us ourselves. In Britain, our most prestigious award for writing for young people is the Carnegie Medal. It has been given to books about tiny people living under the floorboards, to adventure stories about talking rabbits, and to series that open with pooing dogs and then move sideways into meditations on personal responsibility.

That's what great art is – it's multitudinous. As a child I read everything. Sometimes I wanted something serious, sometimes something silly. Children's books should be as various as children are themselves, and that's as true in times of turmoil as it is in peace.

The most popular children's author of the Second World War, in Britain, was Enid Blyton. She wrote about circuses, and ginger beer, and fairies, and children who camped on islands and foiled smugglers. Her work is about as far removed from the war as you could possibly get. But her

novels are a response to the chaos, just as much as *Carrie's War* or *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* are. *Carrie's War* is a novel about discomfort and uncertainty. *Five on a Treasure Island*, first published in 1942, is as comforting and undemanding as a soft toy or a pair of slippers. But both speak to a child whose world has been transformed by catastrophic events outside of their control. Both serve a purpose. And both are important.

So how did I answer this question? Well, the first thing I wrote, prosaically, was a picture book about lockdown. It was called *Staying Home*, it was illustrated magnificently by Viviane Schwarz, and we published it for free on the internet. Then I started a new novel for reluctant readers, this one a historical story about living with the aftermath of trauma.

As I got used to the new normal, I wrote a picture book about oceans and worked my way steadily through my copy edits – a rather boring response, but a very practical one.

I am not going to write another book about lockdown now. Perhaps I never will. Or perhaps I already am. My next young adult book is another historical novel. It's set in the 1920s, and it's loosely based around the fairy tale *Rapunzel*. In the story, a girl is locked up in a tower, away from her family and the prince she loves. All alone, she finds her way to freedom, thanks to her singing voice, and a rope made of her own hair.

Thank you very much.