



## Kuranda Writers Group Update

By Eve Stafford

Discussion at the recent Kuranda Writers Group at Kuranda Library was lively indeed. Everyone took turn to share what stories they were listening to, reading or watching, their current writing, then what book was begging to be next from their TBR (to-be-read) pile.

Kuranda children's author Ann Harth said she was writing something for older women while reading rural noir by crime writer Chris Hammer who impressed everyone as a panellist on the Biggest Book Club at the recent Cairns Tropical Writers Festival (CTWF), especially on the book *Horse* by Geraldine Brooks. Set prior to the American Civil War when the entire horse racing workforce were slaves, it has both slave and slave-owner characters speak.

This prompted a spirited discussion on *appropriation*. Just who is allowed to speak for whom? Can men write women characters and vice versa? Of course, but are their assumed voices credible? At the other extreme, can just anyone without any lived experience assume identities to write for or on behalf of Indigenous, LGBTIQ+, or "others" all the way to the Demidenko impersonation scandal (look it up). Clearly not without contention, but just where to draw the line is being hotly contested in literary and movie circles.

Audiobooks versus print was raised. Does hearing the voices of characters supplied in audiobooks live up to creating voices in one's own imagination while reading 'real' books?

Malcolm Farr told us he was following local author Stephen Chong's writing prompts as a work-in-progress. He's just finished reading *The Far Pavilions* by M.M. Kaye about the Dutch East India Company and is embarking on some A.A. Milne of Winnie-the-Pooh fame, *Kokoda* by historian Paul Ham, and with his background in forensic psychology, some works by the Irish crime writer Jayne Seymour.

A wide discussion about the crime and punishment 'debate' followed, partly prompted by US author Dr Ravi Shankar (no not that sitar-playing one) as another writer at the Cairns festival regarding his book *Correctional*. This chronicles his personal experience of being racially profiled at a traffic stop then incarcerated within the US criminal justice system while also being a Professor of Poetry working internationally. Backed by further research he exposes the exponential growth of US incarceration as a privatised 'industry' to be a

direct extension of US slavery. Yes, inmates actually do make Victoria Secret lingerie.

The obvious parallels with Australia's Indigenous incarceration rates and the recurrent tough-on-crime drumbeat at election times raised the internal management styles inside and their consequences, particularly the higher rates of recidivism after dehumanising retributive punishment compared with active inmate rehabilitation.

A few of us watched the series *Boy Swallow Universe* based on the best-selling book by Trent Dalton who has become something of a rock star at literary festivals. Partly autobiographical about a dysfunctional family growing up in the 'burbs of Brisbane, *Boy Swallows Universe* became No. 2 on Netflix, so telling local stories does matter.

Malcolm reported he's come away from his first writers' festival somewhat discouraged at the narrow prospects of ever becoming a published author. While chances of getting a publisher to invest their company's staff and dollars in any author for a commercial return are slim, self-publishing has grown, though there are pitfalls. A big one is 'vanity publishing' where authors pay someone just to print their book without any distribution plan through bookstores.

At the Kuranda meeting Toni Rogers spoke as a former Mareeba Shire Council arts and cultural award recipient, artist and author. While her artworks made of fibres and feathers based on her Pacific Island upbringing are at Kuranda Arts Cooperative, Toni announced her exhibition coming up at Tablelands Regional Gallery in November. She finds herself mostly writing artist statements and speeches for politicians or openings. A proof-reader, including for *The Kuranda Paper*, Toni said she imagines carrying around 'A Pocketful of Apostrophes', itself perhaps a good book title? Reading-wise it's a history of the Jews in Portugal in *The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon* by Richard Zimler, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini which is also a film, and rereading *The First Stone* by Helen Garner.

The meeting welcomed a newcomer currently house-sitting in Kuranda, Jayne, who told us about writing for children and her travel writing from her caravanning around Australia.

A show of hands confirmed that most of us had entered the Kuranda Media Assoc. story competition for *A Spirited Tale*. Now on the second Monday of the month, the next Kuranda Writers Group meeting will be at Kuranda Library from 10.00-12.00 on 8 April. See you there?